



The Representation of Post-1998 Indonesia in *Ar-Riḥlah ilā Indūnīsiyā* Volume III by Abdullah bin Ahmad Al-Qadri Al-Ahdal

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Abstract

This study aims to explain how post-1998 Indonesia is represented as “the other” in *Ar-Riḥlah ilā Indūnīsiyā* Volume III by Abdullah bin Ahmad al-Qadri al-Ahdal and to identify the cosmopolitan vision underlying that representation. This qualitative, descriptive-analytical library study applies Carl Thompson’s theory of travel writing, particularly the strategy of representing the other. Primary data are excerpts from the travelogue; secondary data are literature on Thompson, al-Ahdal’s biography, and post-1998 Indonesia. Data were collected through close reading and note-taking and coded thematically. Indonesia is represented as a Muslim nation facing a crisis of Islamic leadership, the spread of secularism through the media, and Western, particularly American, intervention. Islamic parties are portrayed as decisive actors in post-Soeharto politics. Al-Ahdal articulates a critical cosmopolitanism grounded in transnational Islamic solidarity. The findings can inform research on Arabic literature, travel writing, and Arab–Indonesian relations, and help readers assess critically how foreign Muslim narratives frame Indonesian Islam. This study offers one of the first readings of al-Ahdal’s travelogue on Indonesia through Thompson’s framework, extending research on Indonesia in Arabic literature from novels to travel writing.

Keywords: Representation of Indonesia; Post-1998 Indonesia; Arabic Travel Writing; Riḥlah; Carl Thompson; Critical Cosmopolitanism

1. Introduction

Arabic travel writing, or *riḥlah*, shapes knowledge about the spaces, societies, and cultures that travelers encounter. In the Islamic tradition, *riḥlah* is closely associated with pilgrimage, the pursuit of knowledge, the transmission of hadith, trade, and cross-regional intellectual experience.¹ The

¹ Daniel L. Newman, “Arabic Travel Writing,” in *The Cambridge History of Travel Writing*, ed. Nandini Das and Tim Youngs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 143–58, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316556740.010>.

term refers both to the act of traveling and to the written account of that journey, and it developed as a literary form connected to pilgrimage, learning, and mobility across the Islamic world.² For this reason, Arabic travel texts can be read as practices of representation that produce meanings about the “self” and the “other” through the writer’s language, observations, and judgments.

In the context of Arab–Indonesian relations, Arab journeys to Indonesia have a long history. These relations were formed through Indian Ocean trade, Hadrami migration, Islamic preaching, education, and hajj mobility. Interactions between the Malay world and the Arab world through trade, culture, religion, and diplomacy existed long before European colonialism reshaped global relations.³ At the same time, Hadrami communities in Southeast Asia played an important role in Islamization, scholarly networks, trade, and the formation of Arab communities in various Indonesian cities.⁴ Thus, in Arab perspectives, Indonesia was not merely a travel destination but a historical space that had long been connected to the Arab world religiously, culturally, and socially.

This historical relationship is reflected in Arabic literary works that use Indonesia as a setting, theme, or object of narrative imagination. A recent study by Mahdi and colleagues shows that nine Arabic novels represent Indonesia across a long publication span, from 1927 to 2022.⁵ This finding indicates that Indonesia has continued to appear in the Arab cultural imagination across different periods. The same study, however, also shows that Indonesia’s presence in modern Arabic literature has not yet been examined in depth, leaving room for research focused on specific texts, genres, and perspectives.

One figure who is highly relevant in this context is Abdullah Qadri al-Ahdal. According to his official biography on al-rawdah.net, he was born in ‘Abs, North Yemen, later moved to Saudi Arabia to seek knowledge, studied at the Islamic University of Madinah, taught at an institution affiliated with the university, served as Dean of the Faculty of Arabic Language, and became active as a writer and preacher.⁶ The same website lists his travel series *Fī al-Masyāriq wa al-Maghārib*, which reached twenty volumes; three of them record his journeys to Indonesia under the title *Ar-Rihlah ilā Indūnisiyā*.⁷ This background shows that al-Ahdal’s writings on Indonesia emerged from the horizon of a scholar, academic, and travel writer. His text should therefore be read not only as a travel description but also as the articulation of a particular religious and cultural view of the society he visited.

The urgency of reading such travel texts becomes stronger when they are placed in the context of Indonesia in and after 1998. The 1997–1998 crisis caused a sharp decline in public welfare: Suryahadi, Sumarto, and Pritchett estimate that the poverty rate rose from around 15 percent at the beginning of the crisis to around 33 percent toward the end of 1998.⁸ World Bank data record that

² Muhammet Enes Midilli, “Blending Pilgrimage and Learning or the Literary Genres of *Rihla* and *Mu’jam*: Al-Tujībī’s Travelogue to Egypt and Hijāz,” *Religions* 16, no. 3 (2025): 344, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16030344>.

³ Jajat Burhanudin, “The Triumph of Ruler: Islam and Statecraft in Pre-Colonial Malay-Archipelago,” *Al-Jami’ah: Journal of Islamic Studies* 55, no. 1 (2017): 211–40, <https://doi.org/10.14421/ajis.2017.551.211-240>.

⁴ Imam Subchi, “A History of Hadrami Community in Southeast Asia,” *Epistemé: Jurnal Pengembangan Ilmu Keislaman* 14, no. 2 (2019): 169–88, <https://doi.org/10.21274/epis.2019.14.2.169-188>.

⁵ Rijal Mahdi, Shuhaida Hanim Mohamad Suhane, and Elsayed Mohamed Salem Elawadi, “Indonesia in the Arabic Novels: A Preliminary Study on the Representation of the Near Others,” *Indonesian Journal of Arabic Studies* 7, no. 2 (2025): 88–105, <https://doi.org/10.24235/ijas.v7i2.22265>.

⁶ “Ta’rīf bi Ṣāhib al-Mawqī’: al-Duktūr ‘Abd Allāh Qādirī al-Ahdal,” *al-Rawdah Islamic Website*, accessed October 18, 2026, <https://www.al-rawdah.net/r.php?sub0=author>.

⁷ ‘Abdullāh bin Aḥmad al-Qadri al-Ahdal, *Ar-Rihlah ilā Indūnisiyā*, 3 vols. (Jeddah: Dār al-Andalus al-Khaḍrā’, 2007).

⁸ Asep Suryahadi, Sudarno Sumarto, and Lant Pritchett, “The Evolution of Poverty during the Crisis in Indonesia,” *Asian Economic Journal* 17, no. 3 (2003): 221–41, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8381.2003.00184.x>.

Indonesia's gross domestic product contracted by 13.1 percent in 1998.⁹ The crisis triggered major political change through the collapse of the New Order and was accompanied by social instability that affected public life, including religious expression.

In the post-Soeharto situation, the image of Indonesian Islam, which had often been associated with tolerance and inclusiveness, was also shaken. Noorhaidi Hasan shows that *Reformasi* opened space for freedom of expression but was also followed by increasing ethno-religious conflict, the emergence of militant groups, and the politicization of religion, all of which threatened Indonesia's reputation as a society that practiced a tolerant and inclusive Islam.¹⁰ The claim that "Indonesian Islam experienced decline" is therefore better understood academically as a decline in social and moral authority, a disturbance to the image of moderate Islam, and the rise of conservatism and radicalism in public life, rather than as a simple decline in people's faith.

These turbulent social, political, and religious conditions made it likely that critical perspectives would emerge from Arab travel writers. Travel texts always involve the selection, emphasis, judgment, and framing of the society being observed. Given his strong background in da'wah and Islamic education, al-Ahdal could be expected to view Indonesia not only as the world's largest Muslim country but also as a space for evaluating how Islam was practiced in social, political, and cultural life.

On this basis, Arabic travel writing can be examined to uncover the vision that Arab writers bring when interpreting Indonesia. This makes the representation of Indonesia in al-Ahdal's travel account especially important. This research seeks to explain how Indonesia is constructed in Arabic travel writing, which aspects are criticized or emphasized, and which ideological, religious, and cultural orientations operate behind that construction. Accordingly, this study addresses two research questions: (1) How is Indonesia represented as "the other" from the perspective of an Arab traveler? (2) What cosmopolitan vision does al-Ahdal convey through that representation? The study is expected to broaden discussions of Arab-Indonesian relations through travel writing that records encounters, judgments, and cross-cultural negotiations of meaning.

2. Literature Review

The literature relevant to this study can be grouped into five clusters: studies of the *riḥlah* genre, studies of Arab-Indonesian relations, studies of Indonesia in Arabic literature, studies that apply Carl Thompson's theory of travel writing, and contextual studies of post-1998 Indonesian Islam.

The first cluster concerns *riḥlah* as a genre. Arabic travel writing is a prose form that records the outside world while also showing how Muslim subjects build knowledge about space, society, and other cultures. Ḥusain Muḥammad Fahīm shows that the Arabic travel writing tradition occupies a broad and vital place in the intellectual history of the Islamic world,¹¹ while Zarytovskaya and Al-Rahbi trace how *riḥlah* influenced the development of Arabic prose from the Middle Ages to postmodernism.¹² Newman and Midilli likewise show that the genre has long combined pilgrimage,

⁹ World Bank, "GDP Growth (Annual %) – Indonesia," World Development Indicators, accessed October 18, 2026, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=ID>.

¹⁰ Noorhaidi Hasan, "Reformasi, Religious Diversity, and Islamic Radicalism after Suharto," *Journal of Indonesian Social Sciences and Humanities* 1 (2008): 23–51.

¹¹ Ḥusain Muḥammad Fahīm, *Adab al-Riḥlāt, 'Ālam al-Ma'rifah* 138 (Kuwait: al-Majlis al-Waṭānī li al-Thaqāfah wa al-Funūn wa al-Ādāb, 1989).

¹² Victoria N. Zarytovskaya and Ahmed M. Al-Rahbi, "The Genre of Rihla from the Middle Ages to Postmodernism," *RUDN Journal of Studies in Literature and Journalism* 30, no. 1 (2025): 80–94, <https://doi.org/10.22363/2312-9220-2025-30-1-80-94>.

learning, and the observation of other societies.¹³ These studies establish *riḥlah* as a representational practice, but they concentrate on classical and Middle Eastern travelers rather than on contemporary Arab journeys to Indonesia.

The second cluster, studies of Arab–Indonesian relations, generally focuses on the history of migration, da‘wah, trade, and the role of Hadrami communities. Athoillah examines how the social identity of the Hadrami community in Batavia was formed between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries,¹⁴ and Subchi traces the history of Hadrami communities in Southeast Asia and their role in Islamization.¹⁵ Burhanudin shows that relations between the Malay world and the Arab world through religion and statecraft predate European colonialism.¹⁶ Al Qurtuby maps the origins, development, and historical dynamics of Arabs and Indo-Arabs in Indonesia, including their contribution to Indonesian Islam, Islamic culture, and Muslim politics.¹⁷ These studies provide a historical foundation because they affirm that the Arab presence in Indonesia is part of a long network of religious and social relations. However, they operate within social history and do not examine Arabic travel writing about Indonesia.

The third cluster concerns Indonesia in Arabic literature. Mahdi and colleagues identify nine Arabic novels that use Indonesia as a setting, theme, or object of representation; these works were written by authors from Yemen, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait and were published between 1927 and 2022.¹⁸ The study confirms that Indonesia’s image in Arabic literature reflects long-standing historical, cultural, and emotional ties between Arab and Indonesian societies. Even so, it remains a corpus mapping and preliminary description focused on novels rather than travel writing, and it does not discuss al-Ahdal’s work. His position matters because three volumes of his twenty-volume world travel series are devoted to Indonesia.¹⁹ Based on the sources reviewed, these volumes have not yet been examined in journal-based research on the mechanisms of Indonesian representation.

The fourth cluster consists of studies that use Carl Thompson’s theory of travel writing, which reads travel texts through three axes: reporting the world, revealing the self, and representing the other.²⁰ In Indonesia, this theory has been used productively to read encounters between traveling subjects and the spaces they visit. Prastowo and Wijaya apply the concept of representing the other to show that *Traveler’s Tale: Belok Kanan Barcelona* constructs an ideological opposition between West and East, glorifying the West and downgrading the East.²¹ Utami and Primadani show that the representation of France in the Arabic novel *Faraj* is built through reports about the outside world, the subjectivity of the character, and the relationship between the observer and the foreign space.²² Maulidia and Zawawi analyze *Jaulah fi Rubu ‘i Asia* by Muhammad Tsabit and show that Thompson’s

¹³ Newman, “Arabic Travel Writing”; Midilli, “Blending Pilgrimage and Learning.”

¹⁴ Ahmad Athoillah, “Pembentukan Identitas Sosial Komunitas Hadhrami di Batavia Abad XVIII–XX,” *Lembaran Sejarah* 14, no. 2 (2018): 150–70, <https://doi.org/10.22146/lembaran-sejarah.45437>.

¹⁵ Subchi, “History of Hadrami Community.”

¹⁶ Burhanudin, “Triumph of Ruler.”

¹⁷ Sumanto Al Qurtuby, “Arabs and ‘Indo-Arabs’ in Indonesia: Historical Dynamics, Social Relations and Contemporary Changes,” *International Journal of Asia-Pacific Studies* 13, no. 2 (2017): 45–72, <https://doi.org/10.21315/ijaps2017.13.2.3>.

¹⁸ Mahdi, Suhane, and Elawadi, “Indonesia in the Arabic Novels.”

¹⁹ “Ta’rif bi Ṣāḥib al-Mawqī’.”

²⁰ Carl Thompson, *Travel Writing*, The New Critical Idiom (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011).

²¹ Galang Prastowo and Ikha Adhi Wijaya, “Representing Others Carl Thompson dalam Novel *Traveler’s Tale: Belok Kanan Barcelona*,” *Diksi* 28, no. 1 (2020): 33–42, <https://doi.org/10.21831/diksi.v28i1.30040>.

²² Shinta Fitria Utami and Erip Primadani, “Penggambaran Prancis dalam Novel Arab *Faraj*: Kajian Sastra Perjalanan Carl Thompson,” *Prosodi: Jurnal Ilmu Bahasa dan Sastra* 18, no. 2 (2024): 348–61, <https://doi.org/10.21107/prosodi.v18i2.25292>.

concepts can be used to read the depiction of the visited world, the author's subjectivity, and cultural responses to new places.²³ Ilma, Manshur, and Sudibyo, through their study of *Geni Jora*, show that travel writing can produce alternative narratives about Muslim regions while still preserving a competitive and superior subject position.²⁴ These studies demonstrate that Thompson's theory is effective for examining how travel texts construct images of place, self, and other, but their corpora concern Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. They therefore do not answer how Indonesia is represented in an Arabic travel text written by an Arab Muslim author such as al-Ahdal.

The fifth cluster consists of contextual studies on post-1998 Indonesia and the changing image of Indonesian Islam. Van Bruinessen shows that Indonesia's transition from authoritarian rule to democracy was accompanied by the decline of the liberal Muslim discourse that had been dominant in the 1970s and 1980s and by the rising visibility of Islamist and fundamentalist interpretations.²⁵ Hasan links *Reformasi* to growing religious diversity as well as to Islamic radicalism,²⁶ and Al Qurtuby notes that since the fall of the New Order, Indonesia has experienced an unprecedented surge in Islamic dynamics and Arab-Indonesian relations in public life.²⁷ This context allows for a sharper reading of an Arab writer's critique of Indonesia; nevertheless, these studies belong to the sociology of religion and Islamic politics rather than to the analysis of travel writing as a medium of representation.

Three gaps emerge from this map. First, studies of Indonesia in Arabic literature are still dominated by mappings of novels and have not sufficiently addressed Arabic travel writing as a distinct genre. Second, although Thompson's theory has been widely applied, it has not yet been directed toward Arabic travel writing about Indonesia, especially the works of al-Ahdal. Third, studies of the transformation of Indonesian Islam after 1998 have not been connected with textual readings of how an Arab writer frames Indonesia in a travel narrative. This article addresses these gaps by bringing together Arabic literary studies on Indonesia, travel writing studies, and the socio-religious context of post-1998 Indonesia through an analysis of representation in *Ar-Rihlah ilā Indūnīsiyā*.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative design with a descriptive-analytical approach. A qualitative design was chosen because the object of study is a literary text whose meanings, perspectives, and representational tendencies must be interpreted through close reading rather than measured statistically. The study therefore asks how Indonesia is constructed in the travel narrative, which aspects are foregrounded, and which ideological vision underlies that construction.

The material object is *Ar-Rihlah ilā Indūnīsiyā* Volume III by Abdullah bin Ahmad al-Qadri al-Ahdal, part of the author's travel series *Fī al-Masyāriq wa al-Maghārib*. Volume III was selected purposively because it concentrates on Indonesia's political and religious situation in 1998 and the years that followed, including the administrations of Abdurrahman Wahid and Megawati

²³ Siti Nur Suci Maulidia and Moh. Zawawi, "Travel Writing of Carl Thompson in *Jaulah Fi Rubu'i Asia* by Muhammad Tsabit," *Lisanudhad: Jurnal Bahasa, Pembelajaran, dan Sastra Arab* 10, no. 2 (2023): 69–91, <https://doi.org/10.21111/lisanudhad.v10i2.10792>.

²⁴ Awla Akbar Ilma, Fadlil Munawwar Manshur, and Sudibyo, "Representation of Middle Eastern Countries in *Geni Jora*'s Novel: An Analysis of Travel Literature According to Carl Thompson Theory," *SULUK: Jurnal Bahasa, Sastra, dan Budaya* 5, no. 1 (2023): 63–76, <https://doi.org/10.15642/suluk.2023.5.1.63-76>.

²⁵ Martin van Bruinessen, *What Happened to the Smiling Face of Indonesian Islam? Muslim Intellectualism and the Conservative Turn in Post-Suharto Indonesia*, RSIS Working Paper 222 (Singapore: S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 2011).

²⁶ Hasan, "Reformasi, Religious Diversity."

²⁷ Al Qurtuby, "Arabs and 'Indo-Arabs'."

Soekarnoputri. The formal object is the representation of Indonesia as “the other,” analyzed through Carl Thompson’s theory of travel writing.²⁸

Primary data are textual units from Volume III, namely words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, and narrative excerpts that describe Indonesia, Indonesian society, religious conditions, culture, social morality, and the author’s judgments of the realities he encountered. Secondary data are drawn from books, journal articles, and other writings on Thompson’s theory, the concept of representing the other, al-Ahdal’s biography, and the social, political, and religious conditions of Indonesia during the period covered by the text. The secondary data situate the reading, so that the analysis considers the social realities behind the representation rather than the text alone.

Data were collected through library research using reading and note-taking techniques. The text was read repeatedly to identify passages that represent Indonesia. Each relevant passage was recorded in its Arabic original, transliterated, translated into English, and coded by theme (unless otherwise stated, translations from Arabic are the authors’ own): politics and government, religion and da’wah, media and culture, foreign intervention, and Muslim leadership. All coding was carried out manually by the authors through repeated reading and note-taking, without the use of qualitative data analysis software.

The coded data were analyzed using Thompson’s framework, focusing on the strategy of representing the other. The analysis concentrates on passages about politics, religion, and the media, which dominate the author’s commentary on Indonesia, while descriptive passages on geography and history serve as context. The data were classified by representational vision (colonial, neocolonial or cosmopolitan, and postcolonial) by considering the author’s position as the observing subject, the way he views Indonesia as the object of travel, his choice of language, his evaluative tone, and the power relations implied in the narrative. The analysis attends not only to what the author says but also to how his judgments are constructed through narrative strategies. The first research question is answered by identifying recurring themes in the representation of Indonesia, and the second by interpreting those themes through this typology of representational visions.

Finally, the textual reading was compared with secondary sources on Indonesia’s social reality during the same period to determine whether a given representation is observational, normative, critical, or ideological. This source triangulation links text and context and helps identify both the dominant vision in the travelogue and the factors that shape it, whether these stem from Indonesia’s social conditions or from the author’s own cultural and religious position. The findings are presented by theme, each with the Arabic quotation, its transliteration and English translation, and a descriptive reading; the theoretical interpretation follows in a separate discussion section.

4. Results

4.1 Al-Ahdal and His Travelogue

Sheikh Dr. ‘Abdullāh bin Aḥmad al-Qadrī al-Ahdal was born around 1356 AH (c. 1937 CE) in ‘Abs, northwestern Yemen, into the al-Ahdal family. He began his education by studying the Qur’an and learning to write in his local school.²⁹ He continued at the Salafiyyah School and the scholarly institute (*maḥad*) in Samtah, Saudi Arabia, completing this stage in 1381 AH, and earned a bachelor’s

²⁸ Thompson, *Travel Writing*.

²⁹ ‘Abdullāh bin Aḥmad al-Qadrī al-Ahdal, *Sīrah Dhātīyyah* [Curriculum vitae] (n.p., n.d.).

degree from the Faculty of Sharia at the Islamic University of Madinah in 1385 AH. He later obtained a master's-equivalent degree from al-Azhar in Cairo in 1394 AH and a doctorate from the Faculty of Sharia at Imam Muhammad bin Saud Islamic University in Riyadh.³⁰ He also studied with Sheikh 'Abd al-'Aziz bin Bāz at the Prophet's Mosque, reading selected parts of *Fath al-Bārī* and receiving an *ijāzah*, and with Muḥammad al-Amīn al-Shinqīṭī and Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī at the Islamic University of Madinah.

Al-Ahdal combined teaching with academic administration. At the Islamic University of Madinah, he served as Dean of the Faculty of Arabic Language for six years, Head of the Department of Fiqh in postgraduate studies for six years, and Head of the Department of Da'wah for two years.³¹ He also supervised student welfare for about a decade, founded a supervision unit that later became part of the Deanship of Student Affairs, and organized student trips, camps, and hajj programs for seven years or more.³² He held weekly seminars for students, some of which were led by the university president, Sheikh Ibn Bāz.³³ His writings range from poetry (*Hetaf al-'Izzah wa al-Jihād*) to creed (*Bahjat al-Qulūb bi Tauḥīd 'Ālam al-Ghuyūb*) and ethics (*al-Mas'ūliyyah fī al-Islām*), alongside the twenty-volume travel series *Fī al-Masyāriq wa al-Maghārib*, three volumes of which record his journeys to Indonesia under the title *Ar-Riḥlah ilā Indūnisiyā*.³⁴ This profile of a scholar, administrator, and preacher frames the evaluative voice of the travelogue.

4.2 Indonesia as a Muslim Nation under Secular and Western Influence

Volume III opens with an overview of Indonesia's history, geographical and astronomical location, languages, ethnic groups, government, and society. Al-Ahdal then records his visits to the Saudi Arabian ambassador and to the Thahiriyyah Council, whose members include Syrian and Moroccan nationals, and his interviews with Muslim political and religious figures, including Amien Rais, former Chair of Muhammadiyah; Muhammad Hidayat Nur Wahid, Muhammad Anis Matta, and Salim Segaf al-Jufri of the Justice Party (Partai Keadilan, which became Partai Keadilan Sejahtera in 2002–2003); and Maimoen Zubair, a senior Nahdlatul Ulama cleric. He discusses at length Indonesia's government in and after 1998, especially under Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) and Megawati, the causes of Indonesia's internal fragmentation, and American influence on Indonesian politics.

Indonesia is first represented as a Muslim country shaped by Western colonialism, having been colonized by the Portuguese, the British, and the Dutch.³⁵ Al-Ahdal criticizes the weakening of relations between Arab countries and Indonesia under Soeharto, which he attributes to restrictions on Islamic preaching, and he describes secularism and liberalism spreading through television:

وأشهر قنواتهم (RCTI) وهدفها العام نشر العلمانية، وكانت تملكها أسرة سوهارتو، وقد اشتراها (جورج سوروس) اليهودي الذي أفسد الاقتصاد في جنوب شرق آسيا، ويديرها النصارى.³⁶

³⁰ al-Ahdal, *Sirah Dhātīyyah*.

³¹ al-Ahdal, *Sirah Dhātīyyah*.

³² 'Abd al-'Aziz bin 'Abd Allāh bin Bāz, *Majmū' Fatāwā wa Maqālāt Mutanawwi'ah*, comp. Muḥammad bin Sa'd al-Shuway'ir (Riyadh: Dār al-Qāsim, 2000), 1:7.

³³ 'Abdullāh bin Aḥmad al-Qadrī al-Ahdal, "Al-'Amal al-Da'wī wa al-'Ilmi fī al-Jāmi'ah al-Islāmiyyah," *Majallat al-Jāmi'ah al-Islāmiyyah*, no. 1 (1979): 25–30.

³⁴ al-Ahdal, *Ar-Riḥlah ilā Indūnisiyā*.

³⁵ al-Ahdal, *Ar-Riḥlah ilā Indūnisiyā*, vol. 3.

³⁶ al-Ahdal, *Ar-Riḥlah ilā Indūnisiyā*, vol. 3.

Wa asyharu qanawātihim (RCTI) wa hadafuhā al-‘āmm nasyr al-‘ilmāniyyah, wa kānat tamlikuhā usrat Suhārtū, wa qad isytarāhā (Jūrj Sūrūs) al-yahūdī alladhī afsada al-iqtisād fī janūb syarq Āsiyā, wa yudīruhā al-naṣārā.

And their best-known channel, RCTI, has the general aim of spreading secularism. It was owned by the Soeharto family and was bought by George Soros, the Jew who ruined the economy of Southeast Asia, and it is managed by Christians.

In this passage, television is presented as a channel of secularization, and the author links it to the Soeharto family, a foreign financier, and Christian management. The passage singles out the financier's Jewish identity and blames him for Southeast Asia's economic crisis; this attribution is reported here as part of the author's ideological framing, not as an established explanation of the crisis. Alongside this criticism, al-Ahdal remains optimistic that Muslim leaders can unite and advance the Indonesian nation, and he calls on Eastern nations, here the Arab world and Indonesia, to unite in seeking freedom from Western domination.³⁷

4.3 The Decline of Islamic Political Leadership

Al-Ahdal also identifies a decline in the quality of Islamic leadership from the early years of independence to 1998:

يوجد فرق كبير بين واقع المسلمين اليوم، وواقعهم من قبل، في الأربعينات كانت توجد للمسلمين قيادات سياسية، مثل الدكتور محمد رشدي، ولم تكن توجد طبقة وسطى مؤهلة. والآن لا توجد قيادات واعية كبيرة ذات شهرة واسعة، ولكن توجد طبقة الوسطى من المثقفين والاختصاصيين.³⁸

Yūjadu farq kabīr baina wāqī‘ al-muslimīn al-yaum, wa wāqī‘ihim min qabl, fī al-arba‘īniyyāt kānat tūjadu li al-muslimīn qiyādāt siyāsiyyah, miṣla al-duktūr Muḥammad Rasyidī, wa lam takun tūjadu ṭabaqah wuṣṭā mu‘ahhalah. Wa al-ān lā tūjadu qiyādāt wā‘iyah kabīrah zāt syuhrah wāsi‘ah, wa lākin tūjadu ṭabaqah al-wuṣṭā min al-muṣaqqafīn wa al-ikhtiṣāsiyyīn.

There is a major difference between the condition of Muslims today and their condition in the past. In the 1940s, Muslims had political leaders, such as Dr. Muhammad Rasjidi, and there was no qualified middle class. Today, there are no major, well-known leaders with broad awareness, but there is a middle class of intellectuals and professionals.

The passage contrasts two periods. In the 1940s, Muslims had prominent political figures such as Dr. Muhammad Rasjidi, Indonesia's first Minister of Religious Affairs, but lacked an educated professional middle class; by the end of the twentieth century, nationally prominent leaders were rare, while a middle class of intellectuals and professionals had emerged. The change is described in a measured tone, without disparaging Indonesia, and is framed as a structural shift in Muslim leadership and social composition.

³⁷ al-Ahdal, *Ar-Riḥlah ilā Indūnisiyā*, vol. 3.

³⁸ al-Ahdal, *Ar-Riḥlah ilā Indūnisiyā*, vol. 3.

4.4 American Intervention and Internal Fragmentation

In discussing the Indonesian government, al-Ahdal represents the United States as interfering in Indonesian governance, deepening internal conflict, and damaging the image of the military:

بل يوجد خلاف شديد داخل الحكومة، فبعضهم يعارض ما تريد الحكومة القيام به، ومنهم وزير التنسيق السياسي، وكذلك توجد عناصر الجيش تعارض ذلك. لأن الحكومة الأمريكية ساعدت في إفساد سمعة الجيش قبل إسقاط سوهارتو، حيث اتهمت عددا كبيرا من الجنرالات بانتهاك حقوق الإنسان.³⁹

Bal yūjadu khilāf syadīd dākhil al-ḥukūmah, fa ba‘duhum yu‘ārīḍu mā turīdu al-ḥukūmah al-qiyām bihi, wa minhum wazīr al-tansīq al-siyāsī, wa kazālika tūjadu ‘anāšir al-jaisy tu‘ārīḍu zālīka. Li’anna al-ḥukūmah al-amrikiyyah sā‘adat fi ifṣād sum‘at al-jaisy qabla isqāṭ Suhārtū, ḥaisū ittahamat ‘adad kabīr min al-junirālāt bi intihāk ḥuqūq al-insān.

There is even sharp disagreement within the government. Some oppose what the government wants to do, including the Coordinating Minister for Political Affairs, and some elements of the military also oppose it. This is because the American government helped damage the reputation of the military before the fall of Soeharto by accusing a large number of generals of human rights violations.

Here, the United States appears as an external actor that sharpened divisions within the government and between the government and the military. Read together with the earlier passage on television, the critique of America extends across politics, culture, and the media.

4.5 Islamic Parties as Political Agents

Al-Ahdal regards Islamic movements as rooted in the middle layers of society, namely the leaders of institutions, parties, and communities, whose unity, in his view, strengthened the Islamic social order. He cites as evidence the fall of Soeharto, which he sees as largely led by Muslim students, the election of Abdurrahman Wahid as president, and the election of Hamzah Haz as vice president, and he expresses the hope that Islam will remain under the protection of God. He describes the role of Islamic parties as follows:

والأحزاب الإسلامية، مع تعددها، قادرة على صناعة معظم الأحداث السياسية في البلد: فهم الذي قادوا حركة إسقاط سوهارتو. وهم الذي ساعدوا في خذلان حبيبي (وكان ذلك من أخطائهم التي ندموا على عملها). وهم الذين هزموا ميغاواتي، ورجحوا كفة القسدر.⁴⁰

Wa al-aḥzāb al-islāmiyyah, ma‘a ta‘addudiḥā, qādirah ‘alā ṣinā‘at mu‘ẓam al-aḥdās al-siyāsiyyah fī al-balad: fa hum alladhī qādū ḥarakat isqāṭ Sūhartū. Wa hum alladhī sā‘adū fī khuḏlān Ḥabībī (wa kāna zālīka min akḥṭā’ihim allatī nadimū ‘alā ‘amaliḥā). Wa hum alladhīna hazamū Mīghāwātī, wa rajjahū kaffat al-qasdar.

³⁹ al-Ahdal, *Ar-Riḥlah ilā Indūnisiyā*, vol. 3.

⁴⁰ al-Ahdal, *Ar-Riḥlah ilā Indūnisiyā*, vol. 3.

The Islamic parties, despite their diversity, are capable of shaping most political events in the country: they were the ones who led the movement to bring down Soeharto. They were the ones who helped abandon Habibie (and this was one of the mistakes they later regretted). They were the ones who defeated Megawati and tipped the balance in favor of Gus Dur.

In this passage, Islam is presented not merely as a religious identity but as an organized political force able to mobilize change, build alliances, and shape the configuration of national power. The claim that Islamic parties were the main actors in Soeharto's fall is the author's own reading. Soeharto's resignation on 21 May 1998 took place amid economic crisis, mass demonstrations, social unrest, and weakening military support, although post-New Order politics did show that Islamic parties played an important role in withdrawing support from Habibie and in strengthening Abdurrahman Wahid's position in the 1999 presidential contest.

5. Discussion

Thompson argues that travel writing emerges from the encounter between self and other, so that representations of places, societies, and events always reflect the writer's subjective position; a travel text reports the world while also revealing the self.⁴¹ The findings confirm this for al-Ahdal's travelogue. It is not simply a report about the country he visited but a space for articulating identity, ideology, and moral judgment. What is distinctive is that the other appears in two forms. Indonesia is represented as a "near other," a fellow Muslim society that is ideologically close, which agrees with Mahdi and colleagues' observation that Arabic novels tend to depict Indonesia through historical, cultural, and emotional proximity.⁴² The West, especially the United States and the secularism associated with it, is represented as a distant and hegemonic other that threatens Indonesia's moral, cultural, and political sovereignty.

This double structure reverses a familiar pattern in travel writing, in which the visited society is depicted as exotic and the traveler's home culture as the norm. Al-Ahdal places the West, rather than Indonesia, in the position of the threatening foreigner. His cosmopolitanism is therefore not a liberal cosmopolitanism that welcomes global openness but a critical cosmopolitanism that builds cross-national awareness while firmly rejecting Western domination and intervention. The measured account of changing Muslim leadership supports this reading: Indonesia is treated as an equal member of the global Muslim community whose socio-political change is assessed without nationalist bias or contempt. In the same framework, young Muslims are positioned as agents of change who must understand social and political realities and implement Islamic values in society.

Measured against the three representational strategies used in this study, the passages analyzed do not adopt a colonial strategy: Indonesia is neither exoticized nor portrayed as inferior to the traveler's own society. Elements of a postcolonial strategy are present, since al-Ahdal recalls Indonesia's colonization by the Portuguese, the British, and the Dutch and reads Western influence after 1998 as a continuation of that domination. The dominant strategy, however, is cosmopolitan, because the text constantly places Indonesia within a wider community of Muslim nations that share a common struggle. The postcolonial critique is thus absorbed into a cosmopolitan vision: liberation from the West is imagined not as national self-assertion alone but as part of the solidarity of the Islamic world, in which Arab countries and Indonesia stand side by side as Eastern societies.

⁴¹ Thompson, *Travel Writing*.

⁴² Mahdi, Suhane, and Elawadi, "Indonesia in the Arabic Novels."

These results partly agree and partly disagree with earlier applications of Thompson's theory. Like Prastowo and Wijaya, this study finds that representing the other is organized around an ideological opposition between West and East; however, whereas the Indonesian travel novel they analyze glorifies the West and downgrades the East,⁴³ al-Ahdal inverts that valuation. The findings also agree with Ilma, Manshur, and Sudibyo that a traveler can produce an alternative narrative about a Muslim region while retaining a superior subject position:⁴⁴ al-Ahdal writes in solidarity with Indonesia, yet he does so as a scholar from Madinah who evaluates the state of Indonesian Islam. Consistent with Utami and Primadani and with Maulidia and Zawawi, the representation is built through the interplay of reporting the outside world and revealing the writer's subjectivity.⁴⁵

Read against studies of post-1998 Indonesia, al-Ahdal's account agrees on the facts of turbulence but differs in its evaluation. Hasan and van Bruinessen describe the post-Suharto period as one of rising Islamism, radicalism, and a conservative turn that threatened the image of a tolerant Indonesian Islam.⁴⁶ Al-Ahdal, by contrast, locates the problem in too little Islam in public life and too much secular and Western influence. This difference shows that the same historical moment can be narrated as a crisis of excess religiosity or as a crisis of insufficient religiosity, depending on the observer's position, and that his travelogue is a normative intervention rather than a neutral record, and it explains why he credits Islamic parties with a decisive role that historians would attribute to a broader combination of economic, social, and military factors. The same selectivity appears in the framing of media ownership, where economic hardship and secularization are attributed to a financier identified by his Jewish identity and to Christian management. This framing shows the limits of al-Ahdal's cosmopolitanism: the solidarity it offers is bounded by religious identity, and the others it excludes are defined not only as foreign powers but also as religious communities, including Indonesia's own Christian citizens. Recognizing these boundaries is necessary for reading the travelogue critically rather than reproducing its judgments. Al-Ahdal's critical cosmopolitanism is therefore cross-national in scope but ideologically selective in content: it interprets not only Indonesia's present but also its desired future through an Islamic ideological framework.

6. Conclusion

This article shows that *Ar-Riḥlah ilā Indūnīsiyā* Volume III by Abdullah bin Ahmad al-Qadri al-Ahdal represents post-1998 Indonesia as a Muslim socio-political space experiencing a multidimensional crisis involving leadership, public morality, religious orientation, and power relations with the West. In the text, Indonesia is not merely a backdrop for travel; it becomes an object of ideological reading that shows how an Arab Muslim traveler interprets another nation through the Islamic horizon he embraces. The representation is therefore not neutral but shaped by selection, judgment, and the writer's subjective position.

Al-Ahdal views Indonesia as a Muslim country that is historically, religiously, and culturally close to the Arab world but whose public life shows a weakening role for Islam. His criticism of secularism, the media, national leadership, American intervention, and post-Soeharto political configurations

⁴³ Prastowo and Wijaya, "Representing Others."

⁴⁴ Ilma, Manshur, and Sudibyo, "Representation of Middle Eastern Countries."

⁴⁵ Utami and Primadani, "Penggambaran Prancis"; Maulidia and Zawawi, "Travel Writing of Carl Thompson."

⁴⁶ Hasan, "Reformasi, Religious Diversity"; van Bruinessen, *Smiling Face of Indonesian Islam*.

frames Indonesia as a space of ideological contestation in which the West appears as a hegemonic other and Islamic forces as agents of national reconstruction.

Through Thompson's perspective, these findings affirm that travel accounts both report the outside world and reveal the writer's self, values, and ideological orientation.⁴⁷ The dominant vision in al-Ahdal's text is a critical cosmopolitanism grounded in transnational Islamic solidarity and the rejection of Western domination. This result supports Mahdi and colleagues' view of Indonesia as a "near other" in Arabic literature,⁴⁸ shares the West-East opposition identified by Prastowo and Wijaya while reversing its valuation,⁴⁹ and confirms the observation of Ilma, Manshur, and Sudibyo that solidarity in travel writing can coexist with a superior evaluative position.⁵⁰ At the same time, it contrasts with the assessments of Hasan and van Bruinessen, for whom the post-1998 problem was the rise of conservatism and radicalism rather than a deficit of Islam in public life.⁵¹

Arabic travel writing is thus an important source for understanding how Indonesia is positioned in the global Islamic imagination, and the representation of the other in travel literature remains closely tied to power relations, cultural background, and the author's ideological orientation. For Indonesian readers and scholars, the findings also suggest that foreign Muslim accounts of Indonesia should be read as texts that negotiate solidarity and authority at the same time. Reading al-Ahdal's travelogue clarifies not only Indonesia's image in Arabic literature but also how travel narratives become arenas for articulating identity, socio-political critique, and cross-cultural meaning.

This study is limited to Volume III and to the strategy of representing the other. Future research could compare all three volumes, examine the other axes of Thompson's framework, namely reporting the world and revealing the self, or compare al-Ahdal's travelogue with travel accounts of Indonesia by other Arab writers. The study also does not examine how the travelogue was received by Arab or Indonesian readers; reception studies could show whether its representation of Indonesia has shaped perceptions of Indonesian Islam in either community.

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⁴⁷ Thompson, *Travel Writing*.

⁴⁸ Mahdi, Suhane, and Elawadi, "Indonesia in the Arabic Novels."

⁴⁹ Prastowo and Wijaya, "Representing Others."

⁵⁰ Ilma, Manshur, and Sudibyo, "Representation of Middle Eastern Countries."

⁵¹ Hasan, "Reformasi, Religious Diversity"; van Bruinessen, *Smiling Face of Indonesian Islam*.

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