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Gender equality perspective shifting of Islamic students: From boarding school to university

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Abstract

Gender equality is a significant concern within Islamic education, particularly as students from pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) adjust to the more pluralistic and open atmosphere of universities. This qualitative study investigates how five former female pesantren students, now enrolled in English Literature programs at two universities in Surabaya, Indonesia, reshaped their perspectives on gender. Through interviews and thematic analysis, the research traces a gradual movement from accepting hierarchical traditions toward a critical integration of Islamic values with principles of substantive equality. Academic materials proved instrumental in this transformation, encouraging three processes: challenging patriarchal norms, negotiating cultural hybridity, and reinterpreting religious texts through the lens of maqashid al-sharia. The participants responded with three strategies—reinterpretation within tradition, separating spiritual from social domains, and hybrid practices developed through discourse communities. The study introduces a "complementary equality" framework based on the tawhidic view of equal human dignity, rejecting both rigid traditionalism and Western notions of absolute equality. It further develops Mezirow's perspective transformation theory by incorporating Bhabha's concept of "thirdspace epistemology" into the Indonesian educational context, highlighting literature's role as a bridge for interpretation. Practical contributions include designing literature curricula with bridging texts, training lecturers in contextual analysis, and offering a reform model for pesantren that integrates gender discourse grounded in maqashid. Major limitations include the exclusive focus on female participants and the geographical scope of Surabaya, which leaves open questions about the dynamics of male students' responses.

Keywords: Gender perspective shifting, Pesantren, Hermeneutic negotiation, Islamic feminism, Third space identity

Introduction

The transition from a pesantren (Islamic boarding school) to a university setting represents more than just a shift in academic environment; it is often a deeply transformative journey that reshapes students' perspectives, particularly regarding gender equality. Within pesantren, students are typically socialized into hierarchical structures and traditional interpretations of gender roles, where authority and religious orthodoxy strongly influence everyday life. Moving into the university sphere, however, exposes them to a more pluralistic and diverse intellectual environment where critical thinking, dialogue, and exposure to global discourses become central to learning. This contrast creates both tension and opportunity: students may begin to question long-held assumptions, encounter alternative frameworks for understanding gender, and experiment with reconciling religious values with principles of equality and justice. In this process, the concept of gender equality is not simply adopted wholesale but reinterpreted through negotiation balancing the spiritual and cultural legacy of pesantren education with the new, often challenging perspectives encountered at the university level. Students previously nurtured within a traditional Islamic educational environment are suddenly exposed to progressive discourse in the classroom [1]. This can create a complex dialectical dynamic. The English Literature Department, in particular, becomes a meeting ground for two polarized values: on the one hand, religious understandings of gender roles deeply ingrained during pesantren education; on the other, exposure to Western texts promoting radical feminism, the deconstruction of patriarchy, and narratives of equal reproductive rights. This epistemic tension triggers a transformation of perspectives a crucial phenomenon that remains underexplored in the context of Indonesian higher education, particularly among students undergoing this cultural transition.

The focus of this study was five fourth-year female students majoring in English Literature from two universities in Surabaya who had at least three years of Islamic boarding school education experience. The choice of Surabaya as the research location was primarily based on practical considerations: the

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researcher resides in this city, facilitating field access and intensive data collection. The exclusive focus on female participants arose from field reality: although the study was open to both male and female students, no male alumni of Islamic boarding schools were found who met the dual criteria being in their final year of English Literature. The participants' academic level of eighth semester was deliberately chosen as a strategic observation point because at this stage they had completed critical courses such as Gender Studies in Literature, Postcolonial Theory, and Critical Discourse Analysis, forming a strong enough foundation to reflect comprehensively on the transformation of gender perspectives.

The core of the research lies in dissecting the process of transformation of the concept of gender equality in the participants from understanding women's domestic roles, the right to education, to acceptance of women's leadership in the public sphere. The main focus is not simply a change in attitude, but rather the mechanism of value negotiation that occurs when the legacy of Islamic boarding schools collides with new insights from texts such as Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale or the essays of Simone de Beauvoir. The key questions to be answered are: how did the patterns and stages of gender perspective shift occur among former female students during their study of English Literature, and what academic and socio-cultural factors were the main catalysts in this transformation? This phenomenon is explored through the lens of their personal experiences in bridging two worlds that are often considered opposites.

Specifically, the study aimed to: first, descriptively map the evolution of participants' gender thinking from their Islamic boarding school years to their final year at university; second, identify the specific role of English Literature course material in triggering value deconstruction; and third, analyze the adaptation strategies they developed when faced with the conflict between religious doctrine and Western concepts of gender equality. This approach allowed us not only to document change but also to understand the psychological and cultural complexities behind this transformation process—how they chose between rejection, partial adaptation, or creative reinterpretation of seemingly paradoxical values.

The importance of this study unfolds on multiple levels, offering both conceptual and practical value. At the theoretical level, it advances scholarly discussions by introducing a model of *"cultural negotiation in gender perspective transformation,"* which sheds light on the nuanced experiences of students from faith-based schools as they move into more diverse educational spaces. This framework provides a lens for analyzing how traditions, belief systems, and community norms intersect in shaping identity and guiding educational change within Muslim contexts.

On the practical side, the findings present useful guidance for shaping literature curricula that reflect cultural sensitivity while remaining responsive to students' lived realities. Such curricula can go beyond knowledge delivery to foster critical thinking, dialogue, and self-reflection. The study also offers strategic input for Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) aiming to develop inclusive gender literacy initiatives. By applying maqashid-based principles and encouraging interpretive openness, these institutions can nurture a more holistic view of gender that resonates with Islamic ethics yet remains relevant to modern educational demands.

At a broader societal level, the research underscores how Indonesia's youth navigate the complex interplay of identity, religion, and gender in an era of rapid globalization. This navigation highlights both the tensions and the opportunities of cross-cultural education, where students must reconcile inherited traditions with universal discourses on dignity and equality. Ultimately, the study not only enriches academic knowledge but also provides actionable pathways for cultivating adaptive, critically engaged, and culturally rooted young people prepared to thrive in an interconnected world.

Literature Review

The dynamics of shifting gender perspectives among former Islamic boarding school students (santri) studying English literature lie at the intersection of three academic discourses that are rarely discussed in an integrative manner. On the one hand, studies on gender equality in Islamic education—particularly in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) settings—tend to focus on curriculum structures or religious

authority, without exploring how these values are transformed as students enter new academic spaces. On the other hand, research on the influence of literary studies on gender awareness generally stems from a Western context, ignoring the complexities of how Western feminist texts interact with deeply rooted religious beliefs. This gap is what makes this research relevant: by positioning former Islamic boarding school students as active subjects negotiating values, it offers a new lens for understanding epistemic clashes in transitional education.

This study specifically seeks to synergize five theoretical frameworks that have previously operated in parallel. First, the discourse on gender equality in Islamic education serves as a foundation for understanding the baseline perspectives of participants. Second, feminist studies in English literature provide tools for analyzing academic discourse that triggers value deconstruction. Third, gender discourse in higher education contextualizes the space of transformation. Fourth, the theory of perspective transformation helps map the cognitive stages of transition. Fifth, the concept of hybrid identity or double consciousness [2] is key to understanding cultural negotiation strategies. By weaving these five theoretical strands together, this study seeks to answer how value conflicts not only create crises but also create creative spaces for new syntheses.

Study on gender equality in Islamic education

Studies on gender equality in Islamic education often focus on the dialectic between religious texts and progressive interpretations. Research by Alfarizi and Rahman [3] comparing the thoughts of Ki Hajar Dewantara and KH. Ahmad Dahlan reveals that while both support gender inclusivity, their approaches differ: Dewantara emphasizes nationalistic humanism, while Dahlan integrates religious values to promote equal gender roles in society. Meanwhile, the thoughts of Islamic feminists such as Fatima Mernissi provide a critical foundation for dismantling patriarchal bias. Mernissi asserts that education is a strategic instrument for gender justice, with parents as the first educators who must dismantle the stereotype of women's domestication [4]. A comparative study of Mernissi and Shihab's thoughts highlights their agreement that gender equality in Islam is rooted in spiritual equality (piety), not social roles [5]. However, research on Hamka in the Tafsir Al-Azhar shows that although his thinking does not explicitly discuss gender, it is free from misogyny—an indication that traditional Islamic interpretations can be recontextualized [6]. This finding reflects the complexity of the discourse interwoven between textual authority, interpretive hermeneutics, and socio-cultural realities.

Empirical research reveals a gap between the principle of equality and educational practice. A phenomenological study in Kudus Regency shows that although Islamic Religious Education learning formally does not differentiate between genders, teaching materials often draw on interpretations of the Qur'an and Hadith that maintain distinct roles based on biological nature [7]. A content analysis of elementary school PAI textbooks within the Merdeka curriculum reinforces this finding: male representation dominates religious-public roles (78%), while women are portrayed as passive in the domestic sphere [8]. Ironically, this bias contradicts the "directed free learning" teaching strategy adopted by PAI, which is supposed to stimulate normative-rational critical thinking [7]. At the Islamic boarding school level, Sahri & Hidayah's [9] research identified varying responses: traditional Islamic boarding schools maintained a domestic sphere for female students, while modern Islamic boarding schools like Gontor began adopting a single-sex classroom model to ensure equal access. These findings confirm that gender inequality is influenced not only by texts but also by curriculum structures and institutional policies.

Feminist studies in english literary studies

Feminist studies in English literature are rooted in efforts to dismantle patriarchal domination through textual analysis, beginning with the 19th-century feminist movement that utilized literacy as a tool of revolution. As outlined in early feminist manifestos, activists such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Virginia Woolf used writing from pamphlets to critical essays to build community and spread gender awareness [10]. Woolf's A Room of One's Own (1929) exposed the interconnectedness of economic privacy, creative space, and women's autonomy, asserting that the lack

of access to both has hampered women's literary production throughout history [3]. The development of this theory then spread to the second wave (1960–1970s) with a focus on the deconstruction of gender stereotypes in the literary canon, pioneered by thinkers such as Simone de Beauvoir and bell hooks who challenged the assumption of the universality of male experience in literary narratives [10]. The third wave expanded the discourse with intersectionality, highlighting the marginalization of non-Western and queer women in literary works, while criticizing the homogeneity of mainstream feminism.

The three interconnected themes female voice, collectivism, and the revaluation of the personal as political form a foundational framework for understanding English feminist literature's critique of patriarchal structures. The assertion of narrative authority enables women to reclaim their stories from marginalization, transforming literature into a site of resistance. For instance, Deborah Cameron's analysis of the female voice in public discourse underscores how women historically navigated and subverted linguistic constraints to articulate agency, a practice evident in 19th-century texts that reframed private experience as sociopolitical testimony [11]. This narrative reclamation inherently rejects masculine individualism, emphasizing instead collectivist paradigms. As feminist scholarship notes, individualism often perpetuates patriarchal power by isolating women's struggles; conversely, texts like those of the Brontë sisters highlight communal resilience. Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre and Anne Brontë's The Tenant of Wildfell Hall depict female solidarity through networks of support (e.g., Helen Graham's alliance with Rachel) and narrative framing that positions personal stories as collective testimony [12], [13]. Furthermore, feminist theory reveals how classic literature such as Jane Austen or the Brontë sisters record hidden strategies of resistance to repressive social norms [10].

In the contemporary context, feminist studies of English literature not only analyze texts but also reconstruct methodologies. For example, an analysis of William Faulkner's A Rose for Emily reveals how female characters like Emily Grierson are both victims and products of a patriarchal Southern American society, where her identity is "patented" by male control over her body and domestic space [10]. This approach has been extended to global contexts, including critiques of Western feminist universalism. Studies in Vietnam and postcolonial countries have shown that local feminist literature (e.g., Amy Tan's The Joy Luck Club) often integrates cultures of origin to negotiate gender identities without rejecting tradition entirely [10]. However, a major challenge remains: Western feminist literature often ignores the complexities of religious or cultural contexts, such as gender dynamics in Muslim societies [14]. Audina's [15] research in Indonesia highlights the need to adapt feminist theory that is sensitive to local values—for example, reinterpreting religious texts based on maqasid sharia (the goals of sharia) when analyzing literature. Thus, feminist studies in English literature are now moving toward a glocal framework that connects literary criticism with cross-cultural social justice.

Gender discourse in the context of higher education

Higher education is often considered a meritocratic space, but global data reveals a gender paradox: while women's participation at the undergraduate level exceeds that of men in many regions (e.g., 55% in Western Europe), their representation in strategic positions such as full professorships, rectorships, or academic senate members remains limited. In Europe, only 20% of rectorships are held by women [16]. This phenomenon is called the "glass ceiling," where structural barriers such as biased performance evaluations, a lack of female mentors, and androcentric promotion policies limit women's upward mobility [5]. The theory of "inequality regimes" explains how hidden practices in educational institutions such as the gendered allocation of teaching versus research duties reproduce unequal hierarchies [17]. This challenge is exacerbated by the "leaky pipeline," where women are gradually pushed aside as they move up the career ladder, particularly in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) fields where only 30% of the workforce is female [8].

At the micro level, gender discourse in higher education manifests itself through classroom dynamics, faculty-student interactions, and the double burden experienced by women. Global research shows that female academics consistently

face unique pressures across cultural contexts: stereotypical domestic roles (including expectations of being the primary caregiver) often clash with academic demands, while masculine work environments lead to marginalization in strategic research projects [16], [18]. Studies in Pakistan reveal how gender representations in educational materials reinforce perceptions of women's domestic roles, which in turn influence social expectations for female academics [19]. In Ireland, documentary research indicates that a masculine-dominated institutional culture results in women's marginalization in research funding allocation and strategic project leadership [16]. A "sticky floor" phenomenon has also been reported in multi-country studies, where women are trapped in junior positions due to the double burden that hinders research productivity [18]. These findings are consistent with analyses of systemic inequality in higher education, which report a 30% disparity in research participation between female and male academics globally [20]. In Indonesia, studies have found that female engineering students are more susceptible to "stereotype threat," a decline in performance due to concerns about confirming negative stereotypes about women's abilities in mathematics [8]. Furthermore, recruitment bias is evident in the implicit preference for male candidates for laboratory or leadership positions, justified through narratives of "cultural fit" [16]. The concept of "emotional labor" is also relevant: female academics tend to be burdened with administrative tasks such as mentoring or pastoral committees, which are less valued in promotions than research publications [5].

Perspective transformation theory

Perspective transformation theory is rooted in the Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) developed by Jack Mezirow in the 1970s. This theory argues that perspective change occurs through a critical process of examining an individual's existing frameworks of reference, often triggered by a disorienting dilemma that shakes long-held beliefs [21]. Mezirow divides this process into 10 phases, ranging from experiencing a dilemma, critical reflection, exploring new roles, and integrating new perspectives into one's life. Initially normative-prescriptive, this theory emphasizes transformation as a path to emancipatory learning oriented toward social justice and democracy [21]. However, this theory has been criticized for being overly rationalistic and ignoring socio-contextual dimensions. Collard & Law [22] asserted that Mezirow failed to integrate power and social structure factors into his model, thus viewing change as a purely individual phenomenon.

Recent developments in TLT demonstrate a shift from a normative to a descriptive-analytical approach, expanding its scope to include non-rational dimensions such as the role of emotion, imagination, and spirituality. Researchers such as Dirkx [23] introduced the concept of transformative learning through emotional engagement, highlighting how emotional conflicts—such as guilt or a longing for identity—can catalyze transformation. Hoggan [24] developed a typology of transformation encompassing six forms of change (cognitive, habitual, belief, emotional, capacity, and worldview), emphasizing that perspective transformation is not always linear or rational. A key critique comes from Hyland [21], who identifies a dichotomy of lenses in TLT studies: prescriptive (transformation as an ideal goal) vs. descriptive (transformation as a neutral phenomenon). The author emphasizes the need for transparency in the researcher's position to avoid ideological bias, particularly in qualitative research. Taylor's [25] empirical study also confirms that cultural contexts and power relations such as gender hierarchies or religious authority—can hinder or distort the transformation process.

In gender studies, perspective shift theory is used to analyze the dynamics of identity negotiation in individuals experiencing value clashes such as former Islamic boarding school students exposed to Western feminist discourse. Bhabha's (1994) concept of cultural hybridity and Berry's (1997) acculturation model are often combined with TLT to explain adaptation strategies such as assimilation (fully adopting new values), separation (maintaining old values), or integration (bridging the two value systems) [4], [26]. Research in Indonesia by Irwan et al. [26] on changing gender roles in Minangkabau society shows that perspective transformation occurs through a dialectic between religious texts and social reality, where individual agency interacts with cultural structures. Methodologically, this research requires a longitudinal qualitative approach to capture the stages of change, as well as data

triangulation (in-depth interviews, text analysis, participant observation) to validate perspective shifts. Hyland's [21] recommendation regarding the researcher's declaration of positionality becomes crucial here, especially when researching religious groups where the researcher may have a bias towards Western versions of "progress."

Perspective transformation theory has evolved from Mezirow's cognitive-rational model to a more holistic and contextual framework. However, its application to the study of gender transformation in religious societies remains limited, particularly in integrating power analysis (Foucault) and postcolonial theory (Spivak). This gap is relevant for user research on female Islamic boarding school students in Surabaya, where the negotiation between Islamic boarding school values and English literature can be analyzed through a glocal lens criticizing Western feminist universalism without ignoring its emancipatory potential.

Dual identity theory and value negotiation

Dual identity theory explains the phenomenon where individuals integrate two distinct value systems—such as religious and academic identities into a coherent identity framework without losing their distinctive characteristics. This model is rooted in the Dual Identity Model (DIM) [27], which emphasizes the importance of maintaining an innate identity (e.g., cultural or religious) while adopting a superordinate identity (e.g., universal human identity) [28], [29]. In a psychological context, dual identities often trigger identity crises when conflicting values (e.g., Islamic boarding school norms vs. gender equality discourse on campus) create cognitive tension. Erikson [30], in his developmental theory, states that this crisis is a critical stage in adult identity formation, where self-reflection is key to reconciliation. Studies in Afghanistan and Northern Ireland demonstrate that dual identities are not only possible to maintain but also serve as a peacemaking strategy when conflicting groups adopt an inclusive national identity without abandoning their ethnic or religious identities [28].

Value negotiation is a dynamic mechanism for resolving identity conflicts, particularly when core values (such as gender equality or religious doctrine) are considered taboo to compromise [31], [32]. In the educational context, this process is active (active categorization), not passive: individuals consciously select, modify, or reinterpret competing values. For example, former Islamic students exposed to Western feminism may develop a strategy of cultural hybridity (Bhabha, 1994) by reinterpreting religious texts through the lens of sharia objectives, thereby accepting gender equality without feeling like they are betraying their Islamic identity [10], [28]. Experimental studies in Germany using the Cultural Commonalities Memory Game (CCMG) have shown that active engagement in negotiation processes such as games that encourage the identification of cultural similarities increases acceptance of dual identities [29].

In a religious society like Indonesia, dual identity theory and value negotiation face unique challenges due to the rigid hierarchy of religious authority. Research in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) shows that the authority of the kiai (Islamic cleric) is often the arbiter of value legitimacy, necessitating both bottom-up (through student dialogue) and top-down (through curriculum reorientation) approaches [28]. The "consensualism" model proposed by Clancy & Nagle [33] which recognizes the coexistence of identities without forced integration is relevant here, although it risks reinforcing exclusivity if not carefully managed. Another challenge is psychological resistance to negotiating core values. Kouzakova et al. [10], [34] found that individuals in value conflict tend to reject subjectively optimal negotiation outcomes even if objectively beneficial, perceiving compromise as a betrayal of identity. Therefore, successful negotiation in contexts such as user research (former female students) depends on safe spaces (counterspaces) for identity experimentation, mentor support, and adequate time for progressive assimilation [28], [29].

Methods

This research uses a qualitative descriptive approach with a case study design. This approach was chosen to describe and explore in-depth the changes in perspectives [35] on gender equality experienced by former female Islamic boarding school students (santri) after completing higher education in English Literature. The case study allows researchers to

explore the subjects' personal and social experiences contextually, taking into account the educational, cultural, and religious factors that shape and shift their views on gender issues.

This study used primary data collected directly from participants through in-depth interviews. The subjects were fourth-year female students majoring in English Literature who graduated from Islamic boarding schools. The fourth-year criterion was chosen to ensure that the subjects had attended and completed core courses covering Western Literature, which generally includes works with a humanistic and, in many cases, feminist perspective. The researchers did not initially limit the subjects to a specific gender. However, during the data collection process, no male students were found who met all of these criteria.

The snowball sampling method was used to recruit participants. The researchers began with one key informant who met the criteria and then sought recommendations from that informant to find other similar subjects. Through this approach, the researchers successfully identified and interviewed five female former Islamic boarding school students who met the criteria. Of the three state universities in Surabaya that offer English Literature departments, relevant subjects were found at only two. This indicates the limited number of students with Islamic boarding school backgrounds pursuing studies in these programs and highlights the importance of a qualitative approach that focuses on depth of experience rather than broad generalizations.

In this study, the data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a qualitative approach that enables researchers to uncover and interpret patterns of meaning within textual sources. To achieve depth and reliability, the research team engaged in a cyclical process of examining the interview transcripts multiple times, allowing for a thorough immersion in the participants' accounts and a sensitivity to subtle variations in language and expression. Through this iterative reading, recurrent ideas and notable differences gradually surfaced and were systematically grouped into categories that reflected the study's primary objectives. Key themes that emerged included participants' initial understandings of gender prior to university, the transformations in these perceptions during their academic experiences, and the ways in which literary education fostered critical reflection and new perspectives. The analysis also emphasized how students managed the interplay between religious values shaped by their pesantren background and the academic discourses on equality and identity encountered in higher education. By employing a structured process of coding, categorization, and refinement, the researchers were able to construct a detailed account that captured both individual insights and shared experiences of perspective transformation. The analysis process was carried out systematically through the stages of open coding, axial coding, and categorization. Throughout the process, each participant was identified with a unique code:

Participant 1 = P1
Participant 2 = P2
Participant 3 = P3
Participant 4 = P4
Participant 5 = P5

The presentation of the research results retains this code to ensure both anonymity and consistency of reference, with direct quotations being sourced.

This research was conducted in accordance with ethical research principles. Participants' identities were protected through pseudonyms, and all information provided was kept confidential. Prior to the interviews, the researcher transparently explained the research objectives and procedures and obtained informed consent from all participants. With this ethical and reflective approach, the researcher hoped to authentically represent the participants' experiences without compromising their integrity and comfort.

Results and Discussion

Evolution of gendre Perspective

Narrative of epistemic transformation of former female students

The cognitive journeys of five participants from the pesantren environment to the academic space of the university illustrate a multi-level epistemic

transformation that challenges the traditional-modern dichotomy. Initially, pesantren life shaped the framework of gender understanding through a disciplinary architecture manifested in three interrelated dimensions: spatial, discursive, and psychological. The high fence surrounding the female dormitory was not merely a physical barrier, but a symbol of epistemic content that restricted access to the outside world. "Going to the library had to be done through a hidden route so that the male students wouldn't observe," recalled P1, describing how women's bodies were regulated through a covert panopticism. The Fiqh Munakahat curriculum crystallized the concept of gender through the dichotomy of qawwāmah (male leadership) and qanitat (female obedience), with Surah An-Nisa: 34 as the central proposition. Religious metaphors—such as the analogy of women as "precious pearls that must be hidden"—functioned as hegemonic devices that internalized restrictions as divine protection. Four participants admitted to having accepted this narrative in its entirety: "The more confined, the holier," admitted P4 in a reflective tone.

The transition to university triggered a disorienting dilemma that shook these epistemic foundations. The English Literature classroom became a site of contestation where female students freely discussed Pride and Prejudice with the opposite sex without supervision. The presence of a female lecturer wearing a hijab who fluently quoted Simone de Beauvoir created a cognitive paradox: "I was confused; my lecturer wore a hijab but criticized patriarchal culture as if it were a sin," said P2. This initial stage elicited polarized, ambivalent responses: three participants called Elizabeth Bennet a "rebel" for refusing an arranged marriage, while two others began to question the validity of Islamic boarding school norms—"Is it really true that refusing a proposal is going against destiny?" (P5).

The critical point of transformation occurs in the 3rd-5th semester through the intervention of literary texts that serve as catalysts for deconstruction. The Gender in Literature course presents The Handmaid's Tale (Margaret Atwood) as a dystopian mirror reflecting their own cultural reflections. Initially, participants rejected it with arguments of cultural relativism—"This is Western fiction that is irrelevant to Islam" (P3)—but in-depth analysis revealed disturbing parallels: the Gilead system, which instrumentalizes scripture to control women's reproduction, actually resonates with the preachers' sermons at Islamic boarding schools that prohibit contraception. A three-stage process occurred: denial, analogical recognition, and reflective awareness.

During their studies, new ideas crystallized, giving rise to a hybrid epistemic framework. The following table maps their conceptual transformation:

Table 1. Conceptual transformation

Gender domains	**Islamic boarding school framework**	**University framework**	***Change mechanism***
Body authority	Women's bodies must be hidden	The body as an autonomous entity	A critical reading of The Handmaid's Tale and Foucault's theory
Domestic role	Biological destiny	Social construction	Nora's character analysis in A Doll's House
Public leadership	Contrary to nature	Determined by competence	Study of the story of Queen Balqis in modern interpretation
Polygamy	Men's rights	Violation of substantive justice	An experiment in empathy through So Long a Letter

A crucial nuance lies in the rejection of Western homogenization. "Equality does not mean being identical to men," P5 asserted, "we reject the model of Nora in A Doll's House who abandoned her child." Instead, they developed a complementary model of equality based on the reinterpretation of religious texts. Four participants became active readers who sought counter-narratives within the Islamic

tradition: QS. Al-Hujurat: 13 on the equality of human dignity and the story of Queen Balqis in QS. An-Naml became epistemic weapons to deconstruct patriarchal interpretations.

The Transformation Pattern gives rise to three epistemic variants:

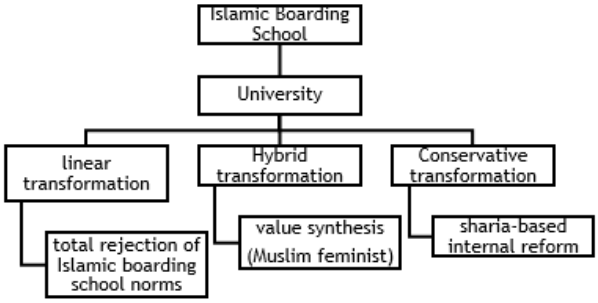

Figure 1. Transformation pattern

Two participants experienced radical change: "I reject all forms of exaggerated religious discrimination," declared P2. Two others (Hybrid Transformation) cultivated new identities: "I adopted Beauvoir's principle of bodily autonomy but still adhered to the hijab as a spiritual expression," explained P4. Meanwhile, P3 chose Conservative Transformation with an internal reform approach: "I will revise the Islamic boarding school curriculum to incorporate a discourse of equality based on sharia."

These differing trajectories are influenced by complex contextual factors: alumni of modern Islamic boarding schools (P2, P4) tend to be more open to deconstruction, while P3 from a traditional Islamic boarding school defends the authority of the text. Exposure to postcolonial theory catalyzes the transformation, while interactions with human rights activists strengthen the universal perspective. Interestingly, all participants experienced a temporary epistemic crisis—P4 reported experiencing insomnia for two weeks after reading The Handmaid's Tale—before reaching a resolution.

Epistemological synthesis

This evolution of thought was not simply a change in attitude, but rather a paradigmatic shift in how they viewed reality. They shifted from an epistemology of destiny (gender as divinely ordained) to an epistemology of agency (gender as a renegotiable socio-cultural construct). This process validates Mezirow's [36] theory of perspective transformation:

1. Disorienting dilemmas as triggers
2. Critical reflection through literary texts
3. Exploration of new roles in hybrid identities
4. Integration of new perspectives

However, this finding also challenges the assumption of linear transformation. As P1 stated: "Our journey is not a straight line from traditional to modern, but rather a labyrinth where we pick up the fragments of cultural mirrors and assemble them into a new mosaic." An epistemic thirdspace (Bhabha, 1994) that combines Western substantive equality with Islamic ethics, transcending the dichotomy that has dominated gender discourse in Indonesia.

The rôle of literary texts in epistemic deconstruction

Critical analysis of value transformation

English Literature course materials operate as catalytic agents that mediate the deconstruction of values through the mechanism of hermeneutic triangulation a process in which foreign texts serve as critical lenses for refracting local realities. Five participants confirmed that Western canonical works are not simply objects of study, but disruptive technologies that systematically dismantle the epistemic foundations of Islamic boarding schools. This process is explained through three interactional paradigms: mirroring (distorting reflection), counter-narration (providing a counter-narrative), and hermeneutic negotiation (negotiating interpretation).

Key text catalytic mechanism

Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale sparked deconstruction through the strategy of defamiliarization. Initially perceived as a "hyperbolic dystopian fantasy" (P3), the text transformed into a confrontational mirror as participants recognized parallels: the use of scripture to legitimize control of women's bodies in Gilead resonated with the preacher's lecture at the Islamic boarding school (pesantren) about the prohibition of contraception. A

three-stage process ensued:

- Cultural Resistance: "This is too extreme for an Islamic context!" (P1, beginning of semester)
- Analogical Recognition: Class discussions revealed a correlation between Gilead's safety committee and the Islamic boarding school's sharia council in regulating women's morality.
- Critical Epiphany: "It struck me: religion can be a tool of power, not just a source of truth" (P2).

This work facilitates what Paul Ricoeur calls a "hermeneutics of suspicion"—an approach that questions the truth claims of religious systems.

Meanwhile, Persepolis (Marjane Satrapi) serves as a model of cultural hybridity. The novel's graphic depicts Marjane wearing a hijab while resisting the Khomeini regime, presenting a thirdspace paradigm (Bhabha, 1994) that breaks the Islam-feminist dichotomy. "She proves that the hijab is not a symbol of oppression, but an identity that can be paired with political resistance," said P5. This text became a catalyst for the four participants to distinguish between the essence of equality and cultural expression, while simultaneously deconstructing the assumption that modernity must clash with tradition.

The pedagogical role of lecturers as cultural translators

The deconstruction process was strengthened by the reflective pedagogical strategies employed by the lecturer. When teaching Lady Chatterley's Lover, P3 stated that her lecturer employed critical scaffolding:

1. Historical Contextualization: Explaining sexual freedom within the framework of Victorian society.
2. Guided Deconstruction: "You may reject the liberal aspects, but embrace the principle of bodily autonomy."
3. Integration with Local Values: Connecting the concept of bodily sovereignty with the Islamic principle of hifzh al-nafs (protection of the soul).

This approach enabled selective deconstruction: P3 adopted the idea of bodily autonomy but rejected hedonism, while developing a sharia-based argument about physical purity as a divine mandate.

Literature as a Space for epistemic transactions

In essence, English Literature course materials function as a laboratory of values where complex epistemic transactions occur. Western texts become:

1. Confrontational mirrors reflecting distortions in local systems
2. Providers of critical vocabulary to articulate resistance
3. Mediators of negotiations between tradition and modernity

This process proves Wolfgang Iser's theory of transactional reading: meaning resides neither in the text nor in the reader, but rather emerges from the dialogue between the two. As P5 put it: "We tear apart outdated interpretations with the knife of literary analysis, then sew them back together with brighter Islamic threads." The deconstruction of values, it turns out, is not the destruction of identity, but rather an epistemic reconfiguration that gives birth to a new subjectivity—a creative synthesis between the heritage of Islamic boarding schools and critical insights from English literature. Within this framework, deconstruction is the courageous practice of dismantling the old epistemic house, not to dwell in its ruins, but to build a new, more inclusive foundation.

Identity negotiation

Adaptation strategies in dealing with epistemic conflicts

The confrontation between Islamic boarding school religious doctrine and Western gender equality discourse created a hermeneutic crisis that forced participants to develop creative adaptation strategies. These five former female students (santriwati) did not fall into a passive dichotomy—they became cultural negotiators, building epistemic bridges through three core strategies: reinterpreting authoritative texts, compartmentalizing value domains, and creative hybridization. This process revealed the complexity of cognitive accommodation in the liminal space between tradition and modernity.

As a form of reinterpreting authoritative texts, the participants actively explored alternative interpretative methods to reconcile Islamic values with the principle of equality. P1 and P4 developed intra-traditional counter-mechanisms by referencing the Quran as the foundation for spiritual equality. P3 reinterpreted the story of Queen Balqis in Surah An-Naml as a precedent for female leadership.

"Queen Balqis is not considered forbidden to lead a large kingdom. This is proof of the capacity of women recognized in the Quran."

Furthermore, the compartmentalization of value domains separates the realm of pure worship from socio-cultural constructs. P5 clearly differentiates between the hijab as a spiritual expression and polygamy as a product of patriarchy. "My hijab is a spiritual choice, but polygamy is an injustice disguised as religion." The most innovative strategy is symbolic synthesis, in which P2 creates a poem that combines Woolf's metaphor of spatial autonomy with the identity of the Islamic boarding school.

Reinterpreting authoritative texts: dismantling patriarchal narratives

The most dominant strategy is intra-traditional deconstruction—utilizing Islamic hermeneutic tools to dismantle patriarchal interpretations. When facing the contradiction between the concept of male leadership and the principle of universal equality, they do not reject the scriptural text, but instead explore alternative interpretative methods. P1 argued based on historical contextualization, "The verse was revealed in the context of brutal pre-Islamic Arab society, not as a timeless guide." P4 analyzes polygamy through the lens of the purpose of preserving the family, "Polygamy violates the principles of justice and benefit in contemporary Islam."

Furthermore, four participants actively collected "emancipatory verses" such as a verse on equal dignity and the story of Queen Balqis as a model of female leadership. Interestingly, they used literary analogies as interpretative tools. After reading The Handmaid's Tale, P3 made a creative parallel: "If Atwood criticizes the misuse of the biblical text, why shouldn't we be critical of interpretations that discredit women?" This strategy yields what Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd calls a "hermeneutics of liberation"—an approach that distinguishes between the universal message of Islam and its cultural distortions.

Compartmentalization of value domains

In order to manage value tensions, participants employ epistemic segmentation strategies.

Table 2. Epistemic segmentation strategies

Value Domains	Compartmentalization Strategies	Implementation Examples
Ritual worship	Strict preservation	"The five daily prayers and hijab are still obligatory" (P3)
Social interaction	Contextual negotiation	"Mixed gender discussions are allowed for group work" (P2)
Domestic role	Limited autonomy	"Cooking can be a choice, not an obligation" (P4)
The right to reproduce	Radical reinterpretation	"My body is a trust of Allah, not my husband's" (P1) "The hijab is a spiritual expression, polygamy is a patriarchal culture disguised as religion." (P5)

This approach echoes that modernity need not be homogeneous, but can have plural faces.

This table shows how students with an Islamic background apply epistemic segmentation strategies in understanding and responding to gender equality issues in various domains of life. In the domain of ritual worship, the strategy used is strict preservation, where religious practices such as praying five times a day and the obligation to wear the hijab are consistently maintained as the main religious identity (P3). Meanwhile, in the realm of social interaction, a strategy of contextual negotiation emerges, for example, allowing mixed discussions between men and women when it comes to academic group work (P2), which reflects flexibility according

to needs.

In the domain of domestic roles, students tend to adopt a strategy of limited autonomy, recognizing that household chores such as cooking are not the absolute responsibility of women, but can be freely chosen (P4). In the domain of reproductive rights, a strategy of radical reinterpretation is used, emphasizing that women's bodies are a trust from God, not the property of their husbands (P1). Furthermore, this reinterpretation rejects the practice of polygamy, calling it a patriarchal culture disguised as religious teachings, while the hijab is positioned as a personal spiritual expression (P5).

Overall, Table 2 shows the dynamics of reinterpreting Islamic teachings: from maintaining traditional norms to critical reinterpretation, depending on the context of the value domain at hand.

Conclusion

This study reveals that the academic journey of former female Islamic boarding school students (*santriwati*) to study English Literature involved a multidimensional epistemic transformation. In this process, their understanding of gender equality evolved from a traditional hierarchical framework to a hybrid model that integrates Islamic values with the principle of substantive equality. This transformation was not a linear shift from "traditional" to "modern," but rather a reformulation of values through complex cultural negotiations. Participants developed the concept of complementary equality—a paradigm that rejects Western-style absolute equality while simultaneously limiting gender distinctions within traditional Islam. They demonstrated the synergy of religious identity and critical consciousness, as reflected in their acceptance of female leadership based on the story of Queen Balqis in the Quran, while rejecting polygamy through the maqasid sharia argument and literary empathy from So Long a Letter.

The English Literature course material functions as a hermeneutic laboratory that facilitates the deconstruction of values through three key mechanisms: first, texts like The Handmaid's Tale serve as a confrontational mirror to identify parallels between religious authoritarianism in fiction and the reality of Islamic boarding schools; second, works like Persepolis offer a model of cultural hybridity that reconciles Islamic identity with the principle of equality; Third, the lecturer's pedagogical approach acts as a "cultural translator" who distills universal values from the excesses of Western culture. This process does not result in a passive adoption of Western feminism, but rather a selective deconstruction—as seen in the acceptance of Woolf's concept of bodily autonomy, but the rejection of sexual liberalism in Lady Chatterley's Lover. Essentially, literature becomes a field for participants to exercise hermeneutic authority: the capacity to dismantle, filter, and reassemble competing values.

This study revises Mezirow's theory of perspective transformation by demonstrating that perspective transformation in a religious context produces a creative synthesis based on a hybrid epistemology. However, there are several crucial limitations. First, the exclusive focus on female participants (due to the lack of eligible male respondents) limits a comprehensive understanding of gender dynamics—the findings might have been different had former students been included, given the construction of masculinity within Islamic boarding schools and responses to discourses of equality. Second, the limited geographic scope of Surabaya potentially overlooks the cultural variations of Islamic boarding schools in other regions. Nevertheless, the findings still provide significant contributions by enriching the concept of the third space (Bhabha) through unique adaptation strategies: (1) reinterpretation of authoritative texts based on maqashid sharia, (2) compartmentalization of the value realm, and (3) symbolic hybridization. Practically, this study recommends: First, the development of a “bridge” literary module (such as Muslim feminist literature) to mediate cultural clashes; Second, training lecturers in critical contextualization—a strategy of connecting Western texts with local realities; Third, reform of the Islamic boarding school curriculum through the integration of equality discourse based on the tawhidi paradigm (equality of dignity before God). Ultimately, the value negotiations carried out by participants are not merely conflict resolution, but an inclusive epistemic model that inspires the young generation of Indonesia to weave identities amidst global-local tensions.

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