

PLAGUE AND PESTILENCE IN THE EARLY ISLAMIC LITERATURE VIEWED FROM A CULTURAL RESILIENCE FRAMEWORK

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ABSTRACT

Studies have found that engaging with poetry through poetry reading helps individuals develop positive outlook in life and cope with difficult experience. Poetry has a unique ability to express complex emotions, making it useful for building resilience. This study aims to explore how poetry especially Islamic poetry could serve as a cultural resilience strategy during the pandemic. Cultural resilience refers to the unique way cultural backgrounds such as values, norms, supports, language, and customs can help facilitate an individual or a community to overcome adversity (Clauss-Ehler, 2004). This present study employed reader-response method, involving 21 student-readers who attended Poetry class at Sultan Agung Islamic University, Indonesia. The class was conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic. Three plague-themed Islamic poems were introduced in the poetry reading, such as: *The Cholera* (1974) by Al-Malaika, *The Black Death Plague* (1348) by Ibn al-Wardi, and *The Night Visitor* (c.960) by Al-Mutannabi. This study found that reading poetry positively affected students who have genuine interest in aesthetic reading. The enjoyment in poetry reading could serve as a protective factor for the readers through three major mechanisms: a reminder to the Islamic concept of qadr or preordainment, the consciousness cultivation of

pandemics as a shared experience, and the development of empathy out of those experiences.

Keywords: Cultural Resilience, Covid-19 Pandemic, Islamic Poetry, Plague, Readers' response.

ABSTRAK

*Studi menunjukkan bahwa penghayatan puisi dapat membantu individu mengembangkan pandangan positif dalam hidup dan mengatasi pengalaman sulit. Puisi memiliki kemampuan unik untuk mengungkapkan emosi yang kompleks, sehingga berguna untuk membangun resiliensi. Studi ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi bagaimana puisi khususnya puisi Islami dapat menjadi strategi ketahanan budaya di masa pandemi. Ketahanan budaya mengacu pada cara unik berlatar belakang budaya seperti nilai, norma, dukungan, bahasa, dan adat istiadat dapat membantu memfasilitasi individu atau komunitas untuk mengatasi kesulitan (Clauss-Ehler, 2004). Penelitian ini menggunakan metode reader-response, melibatkan 21 mahasiswa-pembaca yang mengikuti kelas Puisi di Universitas Islam Sultan Agung, Indonesia. Kelas diadakan selama pandemi Covid-19. Tiga puisi Islam bertema wabah diperkenalkan dalam pembacaan puisi tersebut, seperti: *The Cholera* (1974) oleh Al-Malaika, *The Black Death Plague* (1348) oleh Ibn al-Wardi, dan *The Night Visitor* (c.960) oleh Al -Mutannabi. Studi ini menemukan bahwa membaca puisi berdampak positif bagi siswa yang memiliki minat dalam membaca estetika. Kenikmatan membaca puisi dapat menjadi faktor pelindung bagi pembacanya melalui tiga mekanisme: penguatan akan konsep Islam tentang qadr atau takdir, penanaman kesadaran akan pandemi sebagai pengalaman bersama, dan pengembangan empati dari pengalaman tersebut.*

Abstrak: Ketahanan Budaya, Pandemi Covid-19, Puisi Islami, Respon Pembaca, Wabah.

INTRODUCTION

Three years after the first case of the Covid-19 pandemic broke out in 2019, strategies of dealing with the pandemic have switched from short-term strategy i.e., curfews and strict health procedures to long-term adaptation i.e., adjustment and acceptance. In the situation where covid-19 became a global thread, some sought refuge in exercising strict health measures and adopting a

healthy lifestyle, while others chose to manage their psych by various means. Pandemic has indeed impacted people both physically and mentally, which resulted in the state of anxiety, fear or uncertainty. Expressing these emotions were not easy, given the fact that everyone else was in adversity and was vulnerable too.

One of ways to express complex emotions was through poetry reading. Poetry could reflect someone's experience without being affected by the intensity of the emotions. Poetry has long been a reflection of and embroication for human experience. Either formally or informally, poetry gained more significance in therapy for healing and well-being purposes – two crucial aspects that need to be carefully addressed during the pandemic¹. The figurative language and imagery of poetry could serve as medium of understanding experience and find meanings in difficult situations.

Plague and pestilence were recurring themes in the history of humankind. In Islamic history, both pandemics were not new to the Muslim experience, as there were many narratives of pandemics or the *Ta'un* (plague) treatise. Ayman Shabana summarized Al-Nawawi's (d. 676/1277) listed the five most well-known plagues in Islamic history²:

The first occurred during the lifetime of the Prophet in the city of al-Madā'in in Iraq in the year 6/627–628, which is known as the plague of Shirawayh. The second was the famous plague of 'Amwās during the reign of 'Umar (r. 13–23/634–44) in the year 18/639, which killed about 25000. The third occurred during the time of 'Abd Allāh ibn al-Zubayr (r. 64–73/683–692) in the year 69/688, which is known as the sweeping plague (*al-ṭā'ūn al-jārif*). The fourth occurred

¹ Christopher Mazza, Nicholas & Hayton, "Poetry Therapy: An Investigation of a Multidimensional Clinical Model.," *The Arts in Psychotherapy* 40, no. 1 (2013): 105, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aip.2012.10.002>.

² Ayman Shabana, "From the Plague to the Coronavirus: Islamic Ethics and Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Journal of Islamic Ethics*, 2021, 6–7, <https://doi.org/10.1163/24685542-12340060>.

in Iraq and Syria in the year 87/706, which is known as the plague of the girls (*al-fatayāt*) because most of the victims were young girls. The fifth plague pandemic occurred in the year 131/749.

Historical sources informed that these incidents occurred frequently and repetitively. Most plague treatises in Islamic history had been a source for theological as well as medical discussion. Unfortunately, the expressive and literary narrative on the early plague in Islamic history has not been adequately discussed from the psychosociological aspect. Existing body of scholarly articles on Islamic literature and pandemic focused primarily on the historical aspects such as the history of pandemic handling in Hariyadi & Muflihini³ (2021), or aesthetic meaning of Islamic literature in the time of covid-19 as in Zuhri⁴ (2020). Amidst the scarcity, this study hopes to fill the gap in the literature by focusing on the psychosociological aspects of three most widely circulated plague narratives in Islamic history, namely *Cholera* (1947) by Nazik Al-Malaika, *The Black Death Plague* (1349) by Ibn al-Wardi, and *The Night Visitor* by Al-Mutannabi. The first poem entitled *Cholera* was written by Iraqi poet Nazik Al-Malaika (d. 2007) in October 1947. In this poem, she depicted the sorrow and agony of the cholera plague that took lives of thousands of Egyptians. Various sources cited different casualties but it was approximated somewhere between 10,000 to 20,000 death cases. The second poem is *The Black Death Plague*. As the name suggested, this poem was inspired by the 1347 - 1349 pestilence in Syria. *The Black Death* was considered as the most devastating catastrophe in the Mediterranean region at that time with approximate casualties of thousands in

³ Hariyadi, Sugeng & Muflihini, "Handling Pandemic in Islamic Literature (Study of The Book 'Badzlul Unto Fadhli Ath-Thâ'un' by Imam Ibn Hajar Al-Asqalani)," *International Journal Ihya' 'Ulum Al-Din* 23, no. 1 (2021): 114–37.

⁴ H Zuhri, "Pemaknaan Syair Li Khamsatun di Tengah Pandemi COVID-19 Perspektif Living Islam," *Living Islam: Journal of Islamic Discourses* 3, no. 1 (2020): 149–66, <https://ejournal.uin-suka.ac.id/ushuluddin/li/article/view/31-08/1663>.

Syria alone. Syrian historian Ibn al-Wardi (d. 1349) wrote the poem in Aleppo as the plague reached the region, devastating the city for 15 years and claiming around 1,000 lives every day. Al-Wardi was reported died from the Black Death in 1349⁵. He wrote a short poetic verse about the pandemic just two days before her death, which reads:

*I do not scare from Black Death as others/ It is but a
martyrdom or victory/ If I died, I rested from the
rivalries/ And If I lived, my eye and ear healed/*

The last poem under study is entitled *The Night Visitor* written by Iraqi-Syrian poet al-Mutannabi (d. 965). Literary critics claimed this poem as a masterpiece of Classical Arabic poetry, considering the time when the poem was written (c. 10th century). Al-Mutannabi had mastered the ability to carefully combine an artful description of physical senses and religious experience rather than completely rested his linguistic inspiration from an abstract concept. The tenth-century poet was known for his prominence in utilizing literature as a reference and source of wisdom in da'wa. *The Night Visitor* describes how fever came at night during his sojourn to Egypt. Scholars were unsure about Mutannabi's sickness but some sources indicated that it was malarial fever based on descriptive symptoms in the poem such as malaise, delirium, bone ache, and pleuritic dyspnoea⁶.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Positioning Cultural Resilience Framework

Historically speaking, the study of resilience is the progeny of child psychiatry and developmental psychology. American psychiatrist Norman Garmezy, who is known to be the founder of resilience research, learned that children with schizophrenic

⁵ Mustafa Abu Sneineh, "Plague and Poetry: How Middle East Authors Have Written about Disease," March 27, 2020, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/discover/coronavirus-middle-east-covid-19-writer-plague-poet-book>.

⁶ Barry Alreddawi, Sama & Meisenberg, "A Poet for a Patient: A Tenth-Century Poem by Al Mutanabbi," *Hektoen International: A Journal of Medical Humanities* 13, No. 3 (2022).

parents can actually thrive in their day-to-day life, from having good academic achievements to meaningful friendships. Researchers were convinced that despite all stressors, the key to their success was the accessibility of protective factors such as competent caregivers or supportive role models. This is a pivotal point in resilience studies as the research focus had been shifted from the studies of risks, i.e. to figure out what is wrong with a subject, to studies of development, i.e. study of the forces that empower and facilitate survival and lead to adaptation⁷. This new direction in research also emphasizes that thriving in difficult times is a process that supports individuals at risk to become knowledgeable and actively involved in developing their capacity to face adversities. Resilience was then defined as the containing of outside resiliency factors and innate traits.

With regard to looking at protective factors in resilience building as trait-based vs. environmentally driven, this study acknowledges that positive mental traits i.e., easy-going personality, self-confidence, patience, composure, or self-control can foster resilience in stressful situations. Unfortunately, the discussion of resilience often focused on predominantly Caucasian participants where communal values were often absent. As a result, there was limited exploration for rich external intervention that could potentially play role in resilience building⁸. In a context where communal values played an important role such as in the Muslim community, it is relevant to explore how environmental factors can provide the necessary support to negative circumstances affecting the risked individuals or community.

To date, more recent literature on resilience studies has focused on the examinations on environmental factors which lead to the study of cultural resilience. In this framework, culture is defined as “a shared collective organization of ideas (symbols

⁷ Norman Garmezy, “Vulnerability Research and the Issue of Primary Prevention,” *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 41, no. 1 (1971): 114, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1939-0025.1971.tb01111.x>.

⁸ H. N. Lopez, S. J., Prosser, E. C., Edwards, L. M., Magyar-Moe, J. L., Neufeld, J. E., & Rasmussen, “Putting Positive Psychology in a Multicultural Context,” in *Handbook of Positive Psychology*, ed. Snyder & S.J. Lopez (Oxford University Press, 2002), 700–714.

and meanings) that includes the intellectual, moral, and aesthetic standards prevalent in a community”⁹. In line with this, anthropologist Clifford Geertz emphasized a similar point of view that culture denotes a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life¹⁰. Pioneer in the study of cultural resilience, Clauss-Ehlers, defines cultural resilience as “... the way that an individual’s cultural background, supports, values, and environmental experience help facilitate the process of overcoming adversity”¹¹. Examining resilience through a cultural lens means that we move away from the over-glorification of positive inner traits and begin to look at how risked society is in interaction with cultural resources in facing adversity. Clauss-Ehlers proposed a model called Culturally-Focused Resilient Adaptation (CRA) where culture is considered an important part of an individual’s resilience efforts. In this CRA framework, the adaptation process is a dynamic interactive process in which an individual negotiates stress through a combination of character traits, cultural background, values, and facilitating factors in a given socio-cultural environment.

The importance of culture for maintaining a healthy social climate appears consistently since the early literature of community resilience. Akbar & Azibo (1996) studied how internalizing Afrocentric values such as spirituality, harmony, collective responsibility, and oral tradition served as an effective resilience-based intervention in the face of contextualized risk factors such as drugs and violent or criminal activity among African

⁹ Robert A. LeVine, “Properties of Cultures: An Ethnographic View,” in *Culture Theory: Essays on Mind, Self, and Emotion* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 67.

¹⁰ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1973), 89.

¹¹ Caroline Claus-Ehlers, “Community Planning to Foster Resilience in Children,” in *Reinventing Resilience: A Model of Culturally Focused Resilient Adaptation* (New York, NY: Springer Science & Business Media, 2004), 28.

American preadolescent females¹². Speaking on the importance of culture in the context of the current pandemic, Tubadji (2021) found out that consumption of culture as a public good is associated with higher levels the self-defense mechanism during crises¹³. The study revealed that cultural practices and art engagement during times of uncertainty such as singing and dancing were associated with an increase in pro-social prosperity to help others. These findings asserted that culture can serve as a tool for promoting mental health during crisis periods such as the Covid-19 pandemic at the micro-level and strengthening social capital resilience at the aggregate level. Our literature review so far has suggested that cultural resources correlate positively with the resilience-building process. However, for the purpose of this study, our discussion on culture will be limited to poetry (appreciation) in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Poetry and Aesthetic Appreciation in the Time of Crisis

In an interview with the President & Executive Director of the Academy of American Poets, *The USA TODAY* reported that traffic to the poetry portal poets.org has risen up 25% from 1 March 2020 to today compared to last year in this time frame¹⁴. “Still, I Rise” by Maya Angelou alone received approximately 30% more visits on the Poetry Foundation’s website in 2020 compared to the previous years¹⁵. At the same time, many countries in the world were reinforcing social distancing and the working-from-home policy. How could access to poetry increase during the isolating policy? The ability of poetry to combat

¹² N Akbar, “African Metapsychology of Human Personality,” in *African Psychology in Historical Perspective and Related Commentary*, ed. O.A. Azibo (Trenton, NJ, 1996), 29–46.

¹³ Annie Tubadji, “Culture and Mental Health Resilience in Times of COVID-19,” *Journal of Population Economics* 34 (2021): 1219–1259, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1007/s00148-021-00840-7>.

¹⁴ Morgan Hines, “A Renaissance Is upon Us: Interest in Poetry on the Rise after Year of Pandemic Chaos,” 2021, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/entertainment/books/2021/02/08/could-renaissance-coming-poetry-wake-pandemic/6256821002/>.

¹⁵ Christina. Waters, “Why Poetry Has Seen a Resurgence in the Pandemic,” 2021, <https://www.goodtimes.sc/poetry-resurgence-pandemic/>.

loneliness caused by social isolation could not be stronger than it is today. In the wave of death toll news reports, listening or reading aesthetically pleasing words of encouragement can be a sort of quick escapism. To quote renowned poet T.S Elliot, "... poetry may make us a little more aware of the deeper and often unnamed feelings which form the substratum of our being, to which we rarely penetrate; for our lives are mostly a constant evasion of ourselves".

The delicate language of poetry, full of imageries and metaphors, facilitate readers to slow down and think about the ambiguity of its meanings. Poetry is a gateway to our subconscious state, hence reading poetry can also serve as a beautiful affirmation of our often-forgotten lived experience as humans who share all the worry, hope, strength, and emotions. With poetry at hand, self-isolation befriends the creative and contemplative meaning-making process in the face of the current pandemic. Whenever poetry is introduced as a therapy, both the expressive and introspective process in it can lead to a significant increase in individuals' ability to proactively cope with stressful events. In conjunction with health and well-being, expressive writing can decrease physiological stress indicators such as lowering muscle tension, reducing perspiration level, and heart rate level¹⁶. This in itself can be a soothing and healing method of self-care at the same time. Poetry's influence on patients has also been carefully documented in the study of German poetry therapist Silke Heimes who observed that for patients, poetry provides a space to vent, reflect, and come to terms with their respective situations. Heimes found that the introspective writing that poetry fosters also offers patients an opportunity to reflect on their lives, enabling them to accept their situation with grace and peace¹⁷. Poetry also provides benefits not just for the individual

¹⁶ Kaell A Smyth JM, Stone AA, Hurewitz A, "Effects of Writing About Stressful Experiences on Symptom Reduction in Patients with Asthma or Rheumatoid Arthritis: A Randomized Trial," *JAMA* 281, no. 14 (1999): 1304–1309, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311908.2022.2045806>.

¹⁷ Silke Heimes, "State of Poetry Therapy Research," *The Arts in Psychotherapy* 38, no. 1 (2011): 1–8, <https://doi.org/doi:10.1016/j.aip.2010.09.006>.

but also for family members and the larger community. In the creative process, poetry can serve as a valuable repository of past knowledge and current experience as a source of comfort to risk individuals or immediate family members. Xiang & Xi studied the role of poetry's healing medium in the Covid-19 pandemic and concluded that poetry does not only combat loneliness but also provides a new avenue for helping patients in facing Covid-19 stress and pressure¹⁸. In medical care and treatment, poetry offered an innovative approach to further humanizing medicine through the promotion of empathy, the development of emotional awareness and sensitivity, and the cultivation of compassionate presence¹⁹. Xiang and Yi also added an organizational structure of poetry's healing power during the pandemic, especially in regard to its capacity to deal with negative thoughts. Speaking on the patient's healing process, they further elaborated:

Healing can take place within individuals, at a pace determined by them. Whether it is coping with pain, dealing with stressful situations, or coming to terms with uncertainty, poetry can benefit a patient's well-being, confidence, emotional stability, and quality of life. Poetry restores agency, allowing one's voice to be heard and represented the way he or she wishes it to be²⁰.

Moreover, the study reveals that during writing the poems, patients generated valuable repositories of past knowledge and experience, and can comfort relatives or affected parties, which in turn strengthened relations with loved ones. This study confirms how the three active aspects of poetry i.e., reading, writing, and sharing became incredibly relevant in the moment of isolation during a crisis where loneliness and the craving for

¹⁸ Alisha Xiang, David & Yi, "A Look Back and a Path Forward: Poetry's Healing Power during the Pandemic," *Journal of Medical Humanity* 41 (2020): 603–8, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1007/s10912-020-09657-z>.

¹⁹ Xiang, David & Yi, 603–4.

²⁰ Xiang, David & Yi, 605.

meaning and disconnectedness were involved.

The present study shares a similar opinion as Belinda Jack's that "... poetry is not a panacea. It can't cure us of distressing feelings. But it can help us to make sense of powerful emotions of which we may scarcely be aware²¹." Given the fact that poetry and literary appreciation are both personalized and varied among readers, we are convinced that in a cultural resilience framework, it would be more appropriate to perceive poetry reading as a method of providing positive intervention, rather than a cure or solution to a distressful event. Poetry facilitates risked individuals to cope with stressful events in a variety of ways e.g., as a useful auxiliary tool through which honest voice is heard, as a promotor of empathy and sensitivity, and as an organizational structure in an individual's thought process.

This study specifically aims to justify the role of Islamic poetry appreciation as a cultural resilience strategy in the formation of a pandemic-resilient society. The cultural resilience framework is proposed in this study, given the fact that the mainstream focus in resilience study remains trait-oriented whose tendency was to rule out the role of organic culture and local customs in a resilience-building process.

This present study employed reader-response method through Resilience-Focused Group Discussion on the reading of three plague-themed Islamic poems i.e. *The Cholera* (1974) by Al-Malaika, *The Black Death* (1348) by Ibn al-Wardi, and *The Night Visitor* (c.960) by Al-Mutannabi. Due to the concise nature of poetry, this study limits its focus to important characteristics of aesthetic experience. Aesthetic experience is defined as: "a special state of mind that is qualitatively different from the everyday experience and (however) similar to other exceptional states of mind"²². In this mental state, readers can be fascinated

²¹ Belinda Jack, "Pandemic Reading: Poetry, Looking, and Seeing.," *The Art of Medicine: Perspectives*, 2021, [https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(21\)00831-X](https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(21)00831-X). Jack, 1438–39.

²² Slobodan Marković, "Components of Aesthetic Experience: Aesthetic Fascination, Aesthetic Appraisal, and Aesthetic Emotion," *I-Perception* 3, no. 1 (2012): 1, <https://doi.org/doi:10.1068/i0450aap>.

with a particular object as the surrounding environment is shadowed, self-awareness is reduced, and the sense of time is distorted. In *Components of Aesthetic Experience: Aesthetic Fascination, Aesthetic appraisal, and Aesthetic Emotion* (2012), Markovic later identified three crucial and distinctive characteristics of an aesthetic experience²³. The first characteristic is *fascination with an aesthetic object* (high arousal and attention). It refers to the motivational, orientational, or attentive aspect of readers' aesthetic experience. The second characteristic is *high cognitive*, that is, the appraisal of the symbolic reality of an object and events as parts of a symbolic or 'virtual' reality and transcends their everyday uses and meaning (high cognitive engagement). The third characteristics is *affective*. It refers to the exceptional emotional experience. This characteristic might create a strong feeling of unity between readers with the object of aesthetic fascination and aesthetic appraisal.

The reader-response approach is considered suitable for this study as readers' experience and interpretation of the texts are essential to the reading process. The reader-response approach is heavily reader-oriented. As Woodruff & Griffin put it: In reader response, readers can actively use their prior knowledge and experiences to give meaning to a text, and they are required to justify their unique interpretations of a text with textual evidence²⁴. Data collection involved 21 university students attending Poetry class in the English Literature Study Program at Sultan Agung Islamic University, Indonesia. Participants were selected using purposive sampling with characteristics: 1) moderately to extremely affected by Covid-19 and 2) demonstrating basic poetry appreciation skills. The three poems were distributed to participants. Participants were given an explanation about the historical background of each poem, then asked to read the poems several times and make notes of their

²³ Marković, 3.

²⁴ Robert Woodruff, Amanda & Griffin, "Reader Response in Secondary Settings: Increasing Comprehension through Meaningful Interactions with Literary Texts," *Texas Journal of Literacy Education* 5, no. 2 (2017): 111.

thoughts. The authors assumed that reader's response approach should be able to accommodate the diversity of the reader's aesthetic and life experiences in the reading process. For this reason, data was gathered through questionnaires and Resilience-Focused Group Discussions to examine participants' mechanisms to acquire resilience in dealing with the covid-19 pandemic.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The aesthetic role of poetry reading during the pandemic

Findings of the present study demonstrated that Markovic's characteristics of aesthetic experience, e.g. fascination, cognitive engagement and affective aspect were reflected by the participants. 42.9% of the total respondents confidently stated that they enjoy poetry and confirmed that they consider poetry reading meaningful due to its ability to serve as an aesthetic experience to readers. Meanwhile, 57.1% found that the poetry reading was not so interesting, and they do not confirm any occurrence of aesthetic experience while reading the assigned poems. These two groups of positive and null aesthetic experience were then categorized as Group A and Group B.

Group B reported that even though they could understand the narrative and general message of the poems, they failed to identify any aesthetic awareness. this group was unable to interpret multi-level symbolism, make associations of distant narrative frameworks into temporally and conceptually coherent structures, detect sophisticated compositional regularities, integrate multi-level perceptual, symbolic, and affective information, and so on. We did not find specific (and explicit) reasons of why these participants in Group B failed to reach aesthetic experience. Observation hints that dislike of reading, both efferent and aesthetic, can be a major cause for the absence of aesthetic experience, although a further study on this hypothesis is required.

For participants in Group A who acknowledged their aesthetic experience when reading the three assigned poem, a follow-up in a Resilience-Focused Group Discussion setting was given to identify all possible protective mechanisms involved in their aesthetic reading experience.

Poetry reading and cultural resilience for pandemic

In-depth interviews revealed three important roles in how poetry reading can serve as a protective mechanism, especially for readers in Group A. For this group, reading plague-themed poems generated a sense of remembrance to the Islamic concept of *qadha* (divine decree) and *qadr* (preordainment), as described in the examples below:

“Generally speaking, because I cannot specify which poem in particular ... sorry about that, reading the three [plague-themed poems] is a very strong reminder that it doesn’t matter if you hide [from the plague], when it reaches you ... it just will [snaps fingers]. There’s no escape to what God has decided. Sources say that young people like us have higher chance of surviving [Covid-19], but in reality, it’s not like that” (R2, 2021).

“I think I am interested in these lines the most: *I do not scare of Black Death as others/If I died, I rested from the rivalries/ And If I lived, my eye and ear healed/* because of the pandemic or other causes, death is coming anyway. It [human destiny] is written. Our task is only to prevent through *ikhtiyar* [efforts] and leave the rest to Allah.” (R5, 2021).

“*The Black Death* poem reminds me of death. It was very brave of him [Al-Wardi] to consider death caused by the pandemic as a victory. I could not see it that way yet but I do entrust all destiny to Allah who has written this [pandemic] to happen.” (R6, 2021).

Islamic faith is built upon six pillars namely: the belief in Allah, the belief in His Angels, the belief in the Holy Quran, the belief in His messengers, the belief in the day of judgment and the hereafter, and the last one is the belief in *qadhaa* and *qadr*. Belief in God’s decree and His preordainment, or faith in general, is a fundamental source of strength for Muslims in the moment of despair as a consistent number of research across disciplines

suggested i.e., Hasan²⁵, Ögtem-Young²⁶, Annalakshmi & Abeer²⁷, and Taufik, Dumpratiwi & Widhiastuti²⁸.

Uncertainty about a possible future threat disrupts our ability to avoid it or to mitigate its negative impact, and thus results in anxiety²⁹. Belief in *qadhaa* and *qadr* is a spiritual cure for Muslims as they submit to the Wisdom of Allah and His predestination. Holding onto this belief is a pathway to tranquillity as it leads to divine certainty even in the most uncertain event. In responding to the question of whether faith help respondents deal with hardship during pandemics, one of our respondents (R7, 2021) reveals a noteworthy statement that both *qadhaa* and *qadr* can couple with ease and tranquillity. She stated

“... belief in the two is coupled with a belief in the promise of Allah that indeed with hardship, comes ease as mentioned in the Quran Sura 94:5.” (R7)

R7 later added that she was sure that there must be wisdom behind the calamity and even if she could not see it now, she would find it later on. In this perspective, holding a good assumption in the face of *qadha* and *qadr* translates into believing in a rainbow after the storm.

²⁵ Kristen Ravi Hasan, Nabiha, Diane Mitschke, “Exploring the Role of Faith in Resettlement among Muslim Syrian Refugees,” *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought* 27, no. 3 (2018): 223–38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15426432.2018.1461045>.

²⁶ Özlem Ögtem-Young, “Faith Resilience: Everyday Experiences,” *Societies* 8, no. 1 (2018): 1–13, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.3390/soc8010010>.

²⁷ & M. Abeer Annalakshmi, N., “Islamic Worldview, Religious Personality and Resilience Among Muslim Adolescent Students in India,” *Europe’s Journal of Psychology* 7, no. 4 (2011): 716–38, <https://doi.org/10.5964/ejop.v7i4.161>.

²⁸ Ajeng Taufik, Taufik & Dumpratiwi, “From Suffering to Thriving: Faith in Destiny as a Resilience Strategy of Muslims with Post-Accident Physical Disabilities,” *Cogent Psychology* 9, no. 1 (2022): 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311908.2022.2045806>.

²⁹ Jack Grupe, Dan W. & Nitschke, “Uncertainty and Anticipation in Anxiety: An Integrated Neurobiological and Psychological Perspective,” *Nature Reviews: Neuroscience* 14, no. 7 (2013): 488–501, <https://doi.org/10.1038/nrn3524>.

The second mechanism found in this study was *the consciousness of pandemics as a shared experience*. Participants in Group A shared a common belief that reading plague-themed Islamic poetry led to consciousness cultivation of the pandemic as a shared experience. Recurring phrases used repeatedly to denote this shared consciousness are 1) *global calamity* (32%) and 2) *the covid generation* (26%). It is noteworthy to report here that when asked whether studying during lockdown has resulted in stress and disconnection among students, our respondents confirm this drawback, but they did not consider this as personal risk, but rather as the shared risk of all of *the covid generation*. In a resilience-thinking framework, the ability to produce an *I-Thou* worldview can be a source of protective factors as awareness of mutuality and reciprocity with others, of social connection, as opposed to the *I-It* worldview of separateness and detachment³⁰. This view was cultivated through acknowledgment that negative feelings in a moment of crisis such as fear, despair, and anxiety are universal feelings regardless of cultural or geographical boundaries.

Discussion with participants regarding the impressions of the three poems reveals that there were: feelings of despair (14%), sadness (14%), moved (14%), and fortitude (10%) expressed quite frequently. Recognition of these emotions, to borrow Zature's terminology, is one of the key components of social intelligence that facilitates an opportunity for an individual to grow along as "wired to connect as a unity of being" or non-separateness with shared reality³¹. Some participants noted:

"I can relate to Malaika's emotions of fear, sadness, and feeling lost at the same time. When death is everywhere, it's impossible not to be afraid. I mean ... there are moments when I must go outside [during the lockdown] and I might risk my family with the virus. My grandmother staying with me" (R4, 2021).

³⁰ Alex Zautra, "Resilience Is Social, Afterall," in *Handbook of Resilience Approaches to Stress and Trauma*, ed. Martha Kent (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014), 10.

³¹ Zautra, 28.

“I am not poetic and could not express my feeling well but I think [the poem] *Cholera* is a representation of what I and all people around the world feel at this moment. To feel like Al-Wardi [brave and prepared in the face of death] is difficult, though. I’m not there yet.” (R5, 2021).

“In my hometown, people are observant to the health protocol and follow local government instructions so the Covid-19 death rate is in control but when I learn about the historical background of [the poem] *Cholera*, I am sad but also thankful [that the Covid-19 casualties in her area is low]. I don’t know. It’s a mixed feeling.” (R6, 2021)

In a recent study of the five key concepts of social intelligence in resilience building, Zautra found that understanding one’s as well as another’s emotions is closely related to empathy building while listening without judgment facilitates close relations. He emphasized:

Understanding that we share similar responses to social pain with others in our social world, and also those from different communities allows for the development of community-wide responses to assist others with adaptation to disconnection from family and friends, loss of loved ones, and social rejection³².

In a moment where both the media and government health communication’s approach to the covid-19 report were heavily statistical, the pandemic was often oversimplified as a matter of mortality rate, business profit loss, or hospital Bed Occupation Rate (BOR). A recent case study on Australian media analysis even reported that the media framing was largely based on societal issues with the theme of economic disruption than a

³² Alex Zautra, “Resilience Is Social, Afterall,” in *Handbook of Resilience Approaches to Stress and Trauma*, ed. Martha Kent (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014), 8.

moral evaluation of the pandemic³³. In this framework, the pandemic was not adequately presented as a meaning-making experience that may shape and influence human perception and emotions. Indulgence in aesthetic experience, such as reading plague-themed Islamic poetry, acknowledged these negative feelings and all sorts of burdens during the pandemics are shared as a collective experience consisting of common valuable repositories of past and present knowledge.

The last mechanism found in this study was *empathy development*. In this study, empathy is defined as “a form of mutual gasps of the experiential reality of the other and our own”³⁴. In 2011, Tom Williams conducted a comprehensive experimental study on the relationship between empathic understanding and aesthetic experience among literature students. The study design was based on Mazza & Hynes's (2003) poetry therapy models that rested on a belief that poetry can serve as a supportive object for the reader and also an object that evokes empathy in readers³⁵:

Poetry offers students the opportunity to increase their self-awareness by helping them examine their experiences in terms of emotions and mental images as well as language. By developing empathic understanding through the reading of poetry in the classrooms, students begin to see themselves and others, through others in a safe environment.

Poetry allows poet's expression of despair and sorrow to be translated as art, rather than exposure of vulnerability. Readers, on the other end, often paired this emotional encounter with a

³³ Paul R. Thomas, Trevor & Ward, “How the Media Places Responsibility for the COVID-19 Pandemic—An Australian Media Analysis,” *Public Health Education and Promotion* 8 (2020): 4, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2020.00483>.

³⁴ Rud Claudio, “Empathy: The Adventure of Being Present,” *Person-Centered & Experiential Psychotherapies* 2, no. 3 (2011): 162.

³⁵ Todd Williams, “A Poetry Therapy Model for the Literature Classroom,” *Journal of Poetry Therapy* 24, no. 1 (2011): 17, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08893675.2011.549682>.

similar emotion of their own. As a safe space between author-reader was created, an empathic pathway toward seeing the disruptive world through similar lens was also set up. During the in-depth interview stage, it was observed that when poetry reading was accompanied by a genuine interest in literature, access to aesthetic experience can be unlocked and empathy development is very likely to occur along this process. Reading narratives about mutual commiseration appeared to be a great vehicle to develop empathy out of readers' experiences and the poets. A more noticeable sample in Group A also suggests that empathy development is shoulder-to-shoulder with the feeling of gratitude or *shukr*.

“I actually like watching drama with struggles and strength combo. The types I like are when the main character looks average on the outside but strong on the inside and never gives up so when I read *Cholera*, it's not really my time since the vibe is all despair. So hopeless. Not my type of poetry to be honest. After a while, I think that reality is what actually happens. We can't be strong 24x7. It's normal to be scared and hopeless.” (R1, 2021).

“When I read poems, I can always vividly imagine the scene, the character and feel what the character feels. When reading the poetry, I cannot help but mentally imagine hundreds of corpses just rested along the Nile River [from the poem of Cholera] without a proper burial. In my village, the death toll is pretty high but we still bury the covid-19 victims properly using the health protocol. I am thankful in a way.” (R3, 2021).

“I got covid-19 a while ago. Actually, I suspected that I got one since I didn't get a proper test. If my night fever was a poem, it's going to be Al Mutannabi's [*The Night Visitor*]. I was thinking of death, well not the way Al Wardi pictures it but I definitely remember death. I was in my boarding house because of the travel restrictions. But I'm alive, *Alhamdulillah* I am now with my family” (R4, 2021).

It is natural to associate empathy with doing kindness to others. In fact, empathizing with others' misery is a common method in Indonesian parenting to grow children's gratitude in a conflicting situation. Empathy is thus a long-learned mechanism used to put someone in someone else's shoes. However, the study respondents indicated that being kind to ourselves is also necessary, especially in challenging time.

From this discussion, it can be said that aesthetic experience in literary reading can serve as a protective factor to readers and would suggest literature instructors to consider Rich Furman's poetry therapy method³⁶ to 1) grow a sense of empathy as a prerequisite for social justice and 2) self-cultivate an attitude of understanding and accepting to different responses to a shared reality.

CONCLUSION

This article concludes that textual intervention in poetry reading could serve as a positive consoling tool during stressful events, including the Covid-19 pandemic. However, some notes of exception do occur. The result of this study demonstrates that reading poetry affects readers who have genuine interest in aesthetic experience. Readers in this study found that poetry reading was fascinating, cognitively engaging, and meaningful. When poetry intervention was given during the lockdown, poetry served as a protective factor for the participants through three major aspects: first, as a reminder to the Islamic concept of *qadr* or preordainment. Second, as consciousness cultivation of pandemics as a shared experience through an *I-Thou* worldview, instead of the *I-It* worldview, and third, as the development of empathy out of those experiences.

Further studies on aesthetic experience and cultural resilience on poetry and poetry reading could consider: 1) descriptive quantitative approach using the Connor Davidson Resilience

³⁶ Rich Furman, "Using Poetry and Written Exercises to Teach Empathy," *The Journal of Poetry Therapy* 18, no. 2 (2005): 103–10, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/08893670500140549>.

Scale (CD-RISC) to measure the effectiveness of poetry reading or writing as a form of therapy for pandemic-affected subjects, or 2) the complex relationship between sociocultural background of poetry readers and their aesthetic experience level in the face of adversity.

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Appendix 1. Cholera (1947) by Nazik Al-Malaika

الكوليرا
The Cholera
سَكَنَ اللَّيْلُ
the night dwelt
أصغ إلى وَقَعِ صَدَى الأناة
Listen to the echo of the groans
على الأموات تحت الصمت، في عمق الظلمة،
In the depths of darkness, under the silence, over the dead
تضطربُ صرَخَاتُ تَعْلُو،
cries rising, trembling
يلتهبُ حزنٌ يتدفقُ،
sadness flows, inflames
يتعثرُ فيه صدى الأهات
The echo of groans stumbles
في كل فؤادٍ غليانُ
In every heart is boiling
في الكوخ الساكنِ أحزانُ
In the hut of sorrows
في كل مكانٍ روحٌ تصرخُ في الظلماتُ
Everywhere a soul cries out in the dark
في كلِّ مكانٍ يبكي صوتُ
Everywhere voice cries

هذا ما قد مَرَّقَهُ الموتُ
This is what death has torn apart
الموتُ الموتُ الموتُ
death death death
يا حُزْنَ النيلِ الصارخِ مما فعلَ الموتُ
Oh, the sadness of the Nile for what death has done
طلَّعَ الفجرُ
dawn breaks
أصغ إلى وَقَعِ خُطَى الماشينِ
Listen to the machine's footsteps
انظرُ ركبَ الباكينِ أصيخُ، في صمتِ الفجرِ،
In the silence of dawn, shriek, look at the weeping knees

عشرونا عشرةً أموات،

Ten dead, twenty

لا تُحْصِي لِلباكينا

You can't get enough of the bakina

اسمَعُ صَوْتِ الطِّفْلِ الْمَسْكِينِ

Hear the poor boy's voice

ضَاعَ الْعَدَدُ مَوْتَى، مَوْتَى،

dead, dead, number lost

لَمْ يَبْقَ عَدَدُ مَوْتَى، مَوْتَى،

dead, dead, there is no tomorrow

فِي كُلِّ مَكَانٍ جَسَدٌ يَنْدُبُهُ مَحْزُونٌ

Everywhere a body mourns lamenting

لَا لِحِظَةً إِخْلَادٍ لَا صَمْتٌ

No moment of eternity, no silence

هَذَا مَا فَعَلَتْ كَفُّ الْمَوْتِ

This is what the palm of death did

الْمَوْتِ الْمَوْتِ الْمَوْتِ

death death death

تَشْكُو الْبَشَرِيَّةُ تَشْكُو مَا يَرْتَكِبُ الْمَوْتِ

Humanity complains about what death commits

الْكُولِيرَا

cholera

فِي كَهْفِ الرُّعْبِ مَعَ الْأَشْلَاءِ

In the cave of terror with the body parts

فِي صَمْتِ الْأَيْدِ الْقَاسِيِ حَيْثُ الْمَوْتِ دَوَاءٌ

In the cruel silence of eternity where death is medicine

اسْتَيْقِظْ دَاءُ الْكُولِيرَا

cholera wake up

حَقْدًا يَتَدَفَّقُ مَوْتُورَا

really flowing motor

هَبِطَ الْوَادِي الْمَرِحُ الْوَضَاءِ

The valley of the joyful ablution descended

يَصْرُخُ مُضْطَرَبًا مَجْنُونَا

Crying out of frustration

لَا يَسْمَعُ صَوْتِ الْبَاكِينَا

Can't hear the sound of the bakina

في كلِّ مكانٍ خَلَّفَ مَخْلَبُهُ أَصْدَاءَ
Everywhere his claw left echoes
في كوخِ الفلّاحَةِ في البَيْتِ
In the farmer's hut at home
لا شيءَ سِوَى صَرَخَاتِ المَوْتِ
Nothing but the cries of death
المَوْتُ المَوْتُ المَوْتُ
death death death
في شَخْصِ الكوليرا القاسي يَنْتَقِمُ المَوْتُ
In the cruel person of cholera, death avenges
الصَمْتُ مَرِيضٌ
the silence is bitter
لا شيءَ سِوَى رَجْعِ التَّكْبِيرِ
Nothing but zoom back in
حَتَّى حَقَّارُ القَبْرِ تُؤَى لَمْ يَبْقَ نَصِيرٌ
Even the grave digger has no supporter left
الجامعُ ماتَ مُؤَدَّنُهُ
The mosque's muezzin died
المَيِّتُ مِنْ سَيُؤِئُهُ
The dead will mourn him
لَمْ يَبْقَ سِوَى نُوحٍ وَزَفِيرِ
Only Noah and Zephyr remain
الطِفْلُ بِلا أُمٍّ وَأَبٍ
The child without a mother and father
يَبْكِي مِنْ قَلْبٍ مَلْتَهَبٍ
crying from a broken heart
وَعَدًا لا شَكَّ سَيَلْقَهُ الداءُ الشَّرِيرُ
Tomorrow is undoubtedly taken by an evil disease
يا شَبَّاحَ الهَيْضَةِ ما أَبْقَيْتُ
O ghost of the rising, what have you kept?
لا شيءَ سِوَى أَحْزَانِ المَوْتِ
Nothing but the sorrows of death
المَوْتُ، المَوْتُ، المَوْتُ
death, death, death
يا مِصْرُ شَعُورِي مَرَّقَهُ ما فَعَلَ المَوْتُ
O Egypt, my feelings were torn apart by what death did

Appendix 2. The Night Visitor by Al Mutanabbi

غليلُ الجِسمِ مُمتَنِعُ القِيَامِ...
Sick of body, unable to rise up...
شَدِيدُ السُّكْرِ مِنْ غَيْرِ المُدَامِ
Vehemently intoxicated without wine ...
وَرَائِرَتِي كَأَنَّ بِهَا حَيَاءً...
And it is as though she who visits me was filled with modesty...
فَلَيْسَ تَزْوُرُ إِلَّا فِي الظَّلَامِ
*For she does not pay her visits save under cover of
darkness*
بَدَلْتُ لَهَا المَطَارِفَ وَالحَشَايَا
I freely offered her my linen and my pillows
فَعَاقَتَهَا وَبَاتَتْ فِي عِظَامِي
*But she refused them and spent the night in my
bones*
...يَضِيقُ الجِلْدُ عَنِ نَفْسِي وَعَظْمَا
*My skin is too contracted to contain both my breath
and her*
فَتَوَسَّعَتْ بِأَنْوَاعِ السِّقَامِ
So, she relaxes it with all sorts of sickness
إِذَا مَا فَارَقْتَنِي عَسَلْتَنِي...
When she leaves me, she washes me
كَأَنَّا عَاكِفَانِ عَلَى حَرَامٍ
*As though we had retired apart for some
forbidden action*
...كَأَنَّ الصُّبْحَ يَطْرُدُهَا فَتَجْرِي
It is as though the morning drives her away
مَدَامِعُهَا بِأَرْبَعَةِ سِيجَامٍ
*And her lachrymal ducts are flooded in her four
channels*
...أَرَاقِبُ وَقَتِّهَا مِنْ غَيْرِ شَوْقٍ
I watch for her time without desire
مُرَاقِبَةَ المَشْوُوقِ المُسْتَهَامِ
Yet with the watchfulness of the eager lover
وَيَصْدُقُ وَعَدُّهَا وَالصِّدْقُ
And she is ever faithful to her appointed time, but

faithfulness is

... شَرٌّ

An evil ...

إِذَا أَلْقَاكَ فِي الْكُرْبِ الْعِظَامِ

When it casts thee into grievous sufferings