

# Harmonizing Tradition and Modernity: Teaching Critical Thinking in Islamic Religious Education

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**ABSTRACT:** This research investigates the incorporation of critical thinking into the educational framework of the Qur'an and Hadith at Madrasah Tsanawiyah Negeri (MTsN) 2 Tulungagung, with an emphasis on methods aimed at cultivating students' analytical and reflective competencies. In addressing the deficiencies prevalent in religious education, typically marked by rote memorization, this inquiry examines two primary facets: the varieties of exercises that promote critical thinking, and the mechanisms by which teachers establish a nurturing learning environment. A qualitative case study approach was employed, which included comprehensive interviews, participant observation, and the analysis of relevant documents. The findings indicate that teachers employ literacy-based activities, questions that facilitate Higher-Order Thinking Skills (HOTS), and pedagogical strategies centered on students to enhance engagement with Islamic teachings. Such exercises augment their capacity to analyze, assess, and implement knowledge within practical contexts. Furthermore, instructors cultivate an interactive and supportive classroom milieu through strategies such as democratic learning, contentious discussions, and problem-oriented tasks, which encourage critical inquiry and collaborative problem resolution. The integration of critical thinking within Qur'an and Hadith pedagogy exemplifies a successful method of harmonizing traditional values with contemporary educational practices. By equipping learners with fundamental cognitive abilities, this approach not only deepens their comprehension of religious texts but also primes them to confront modern societal dilemmas. Notwithstanding these achievements, the study underscores challenges such as students' inclination towards memorization, highlighting the necessity for continual enhancement of pedagogical strategies to optimize the development of critical thinking within religious education.

**KEYWORDS:** critical thinking, Qur'an and Hadith, religious education, teaching strategies

## I. INTRODUCTION

Enhancing the quality of human resources is a key determinant of success in addressing the challenges of globalization. In this context, education plays a central role as a means to shape an intelligent, peaceful, open, and democratic society. Madrasahs, as religious-based educational institutions, bear a significant responsibility in producing graduates who not only understand religious values but also possess critical thinking skills. A modern approach to religious education, which integrates critical thinking abilities, has become increasingly relevant to meet the demands of the times (Ilechukwu, 2014, and Jarmer 2024).

In the learning process, the strategies designed by teachers significantly influence the success of students in achieving educational goals. These strategies encompass various methods aimed at helping students learn effectively. Teachers are not merely tasked with delivering material but are also responsible for creating an interactive learning environment that fosters the development of critical thinking skills. By employing cooperative approaches, teachers can assist students in overcoming learning barriers and encourage them to develop deep and analytical thinking (Keiler, 2018).

Critical thinking skills are essential in navigating the rapid advancement of science and technology. These skills involve processes of analysis, evaluation, and decision-making based on available data and information (Dalimunthe and Siregar, 2024 and Anderson, 2017). In the context of religious education, critical thinking can help students better understand and apply the teachings of the Qur'an and Hadith. Consequently, students are not only expected to memorize sacred texts but also to interpret and practice them in their daily lives.

As a component of Islamic Religious Education, the Qur'an and Hadith hold a strategic role in shaping students' character and understanding. However, in reality, religious education often receives less attention compared to subjects such as science. Religious education often finds itself overshadowed by subjects like science, mathematics, and technology, which are perceived as more directly linked to economic advancement and innovation. This disparity in attention can stem from the prioritization of STEM disciplines in national curriculums, which are frequently regarded as key drivers of progress in the modern world. Consequently, religious education may receive limited resources, reduced instructional time, or less emphasis in assessments and policy frameworks (Maghfuri, 2020, and Laila et al. 2020). This necessitates innovative efforts to make religious education more engaging and relevant for students. One way to achieve this is by integrating critical thinking skills into the curriculum and teaching methods (Dalimunthe and Siregar, 2024, and Cardino and Ortega-Dela Cruz, 2020).

Madrasah Tsanawiyah Negeri (MTsN) 2 Tulungagung serves as an exemplary Islamic educational institution that has successfully adopted this approach. Utilizing group discussions, collaborative activities, and a conducive classroom atmosphere, madrasah has created a learning environment that encourages students to think critically. Additionally, teachers at madrasah provide full support to students in developing new ideas, engaging in discussions, and exploring diverse perspectives to understand religious teachings.

Several studies have explored strategies for fostering critical thinking skills in Islamic education. For instance: Nadhiroh and Anshori (2023), Khansa et al. (2024), Ubaidilah and Setiawan (2024), Hosaini et al. (2024), Pransiska, Sari, and Nasution (2024). These studies underline the importance of developing critical thinking in religious education and the critical roles of teachers in it. While previous research has predominantly focused on fostering critical thinking in religious education in general, limited attention has been given to critical thinking development within Al-Qur'an and Hadith studies. This research seeks to address this gap by exploring how teachers at MTsN 2 Tulungagung implement critical thinking strategies specific to these subjects.

This article aims to explore how teachers at MTsN 2 Tulungagung integrate critical thinking skills into the teaching of the Qur'an and Hadith. The focus of this research covers two main questions: (1) what forms of exercises are designed to develop students' critical thinking? and (2) what forms of supports teachers give to students to create a conducive classroom atmosphere?. By emphasizing the enhancement of critical thinking skills, this study aims to provide valuable insights into how Islamic studies can effectively contribute to critical thinking development, thereby enriching pedagogical practices and enhancing the relevance of religious education in contemporary times.

## II. LITERATURE STUDIES

Critical Thinking (CT) has its origins in the work of John Dewey, who introduced the concept of 'reflective thinking' in the early 20th century, later evolving into what is now known as CT. Dewey emphasized the importance of active, persistent, and careful consideration of beliefs, examining their foundations and implications. Over time, CT has become recognized as one of the essential 21st-century skills, alongside creativity, communication, and collaboration. Despite its significance, there remains no universally accepted definition, as scholars have highlighted different aspects, such as skills, dispositions, and habits of mind like open-mindedness and inquisitiveness. UNESCO's definition emphasizes the scientific research process, including questioning, analyzing data, and drawing evidence-based conclusions, positioning CT as an integral part of systematic inquiry and problem-solving (Lombardi et al., 2022).

Critical thinking is often defined as "reasonable and reflective thinking aimed at determining what to believe or how to act." It is also described as "thinking about thinking." More specifically, it involves an

intellectually disciplined approach to actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating information obtained through observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, guiding beliefs and actions). In more recent terms, critical thinking is characterized as "a deliberate, self-regulated process of judgment that applies reasoned analysis to evidence, context, concepts, methods, and criteria" (Ilechukwu, 2014). Critical thinking as active thinking focused on what to believe or do, as opposed to uncritical thinking, in which knowledge is merely reproduced or accepted passively. Critical thinking requires active evaluation of whether a claim, argument, or interpretation is warranted. Thus, it is related to a quality of thinking and, by extension, active differentiation between good and bad judgements, valid and invalid inferences, and reliable and unreliable interpretations (Lombardi et al. 2022; Jarmer, 2024, and Anderson, 2017).

Educational programs and institutions play a key role in fostering critical thinking through various approaches. Developing critical thinking involves the interplay of personal dispositions (such as attitudes and habits), skills (like evaluation, reasoning, and self-regulation), and knowledge (both general and specific, as well as experiential). Institutions are particularly effective in enhancing critical thinking by focusing on skills and knowledge through pedagogical methods. These include rhetoric training, evaluating information relevance (e.g., media literacy, identifying credible online sources, addressing "fake news"), as well as developing deductive and inductive reasoning skills (Thornhill-Miller et al. 2023). Tools like case studies and concept mapping, when used with problem-based learning strategies in individual or group settings (both online and offline), further support this goal (Charmichael and Farrell, 2012, and Thorndahl and Stentoft, 2020).

Marin and Halpern emphasize that effective critical thinking training should involve explicit instruction that incorporates four main components: (1) fostering positive attitudes and encouraging independent thought; (2) teaching and practicing critical thinking skills; (3) training for transfer by identifying real-world contexts where these strategies can be applied; and (4) promoting metacognition through reflection on one's thought processes (Thornhill-Miller et al. 2023). Additionally, Critical thinking skills can also be enhanced through diverse methods, models, and instructional strategies, including lectures, discussions, question-and-answer sessions, group projects, collaborative activities, and inquiry-based learning. Students are motivated to share knowledge with peers through verbal explanations and presentations. Furthermore, critical thinking covers analytical skill and evaluation skill. Analytical skills are strengthened by presenting scientific problems that require students to analyze information, draw conclusions, and evaluate issues through cross-checking or verifying their results. Evaluation skills are developed by encouraging students to critically assess problems and propose solutions (Dahari, Suhid, and Fakhruddin, 2019; Junoh et al. 2021; and Romlah et al. 2024).

In the context of religious education, critical thinking serves as a tool for acquiring knowledge, refining theories, and strengthening arguments through skeptical inquiry and logical reasoning. Its inclusion in the religious education classroom aims to enhance understanding by gathering reliable information, improving beliefs, and supporting well-founded arguments based on evidence and reasoning (Anderson, 2017). Given the sensitive nature of religion, which often relies more on faith than reason, critical thinking provides a framework for preventing misconceptions and encouraging thoughtful engagement. Religion's emphasis on faith typically results in fewer questions being raised, with many individuals accepting teachings without critical examination. Integrating critical thinking into religious education promotes balance, striving for excellence and aligning with Aristotle's concept of virtue as the mean between extremes. Achieving effective implementation of critical thinking in religious education requires collaboration not only within the classroom and school curriculum but also among government entities and parents, ensuring its practical application and meaningful impact (Ilechukwu, 2014 and Anderson, 2017).

Effective strategies for integrating critical thinking into religious education include Integrative Learning Strategies, Philosophical Frameworks, the Infusion Approach, and the use of Technology and Innovative Tools. Integrative Learning Strategies involve the use of real-world case studies and moral dilemmas to help students connect religious teachings to practical issues. For example, analyzing ethical challenges enables students to apply religious principles while navigating complex societal problems, fostering reflective thinking and logical reasoning (Dalimunthe and Siregar, 2024). Philosophical Frameworks encourage students to critically evaluate their beliefs and explore the relevance of their faith in modern contexts. Through

discussions on philosophical and theological ideas, students learn to articulate and defend their views, advancing beyond simple memorization (Aziz et al., 2023).

The Infusion Approach integrates critical thinking directly into the curriculum by using structured questioning and argumentative exercises. These methods challenge students to critically analyze religious texts, evaluate diverse interpretations, and form balanced conclusions. For instance, students might explore how various religious traditions address common ethical issues (Ilechukwu, 2014 and Apsari, 2016). Technology and Innovative Tools enhance religious education by incorporating digital storytelling and interactive platforms, making learning dynamic and engaging. Tools such as animations and simulations help students visualize abstract ideas, promoting deeper engagement and critical analysis of religious narratives (Aziz et al. 2023)..

### III. METHOD

This research employs a qualitative approach with a case study design to explore the integration of critical thinking in teaching religious subjects. The qualitative approach allows the researcher to engage directly with participants, understanding their experiences and interpretations of the phenomena in natural settings (Creswell. John W, 2015). The study focuses on addressing how teachers integrate critical thinking in teaching Qur'an hadiths at MTsN 2 Tulungagung. A descriptive-explanatory strategy is used to depict the forms of exercises that are designed to develop students' critical thinking patterns, while an exploratory strategy investigates supports teachers give to students to create a conducive classroom atmosphere in fostering students' critical thinking (Yin, 2013, and Creswell. John W, 2015).

Data collection methods include in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. In-depth interviews target three key informant groups: the principal and his academic deputy, teachers, and students. These interviews explore the forms of exercises and teachers' support in integrating critical thinking during classroom. Participant observation is conducted in classroom settings and school environments to observe the practical application of the integrated teachings. Document analysis supports data triangulation by examining teachers' learning documents and other related materials. The data analysis follows an interactive model involving data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, 2013). To ensure validity and reliability, the study employs triangulation, and member checking, enabling robust conclusions and a comprehensive understanding of the integrated teaching in religious educational institution.

### IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 1. Forms of Exercises to Develop Students' Critical Thinking in Al-Qur'an Hadith Learning at MTsN 2 Tulungagung

The integration of critical thinking in learning Qur'an Hadith at MTsN 2 Tulungagung is generally implemented effectively through various methods and strategies in the classroom. Several types of exercises are specifically designed to enhance students' critical thinking abilities. Teachers of Al-Qur'an Hadith consistently prepare instructional plans aimed at achieving educational objectives aligned with Islamic principles. These plans serve as crucial guidelines for facilitating the learning process and attaining the predetermined goals.

Three primary exercises are employed in teaching Qur'an Hadith: literacy activities, the development of HOTS (Higher-Order Thinking Skills) questions, and student-centered learning models. Literacy activities are conducted aiming at enhancing students' reading, writing, comprehension, and information-processing skills. Literacy extends beyond basic abilities, incorporating deep text comprehension, critical thinking, and effective communication. Students are guided to identify, collect, and organize information during literacy sessions. Following this, they discuss their findings with peers, after which the teacher reviews their ideas, provides explanations, and summarizes the discussion outcomes.

HOTS questions are crafted to cultivate advanced critical thinking skills, such as analyzing, evaluating, and creating. Unlike basic recall or understanding, HOTS questions challenge students to apply, synthesize, and critically evaluate information. By engaging with these questions, students gain deeper insights into Islamic teachings, relate the questions to real-life scenarios, and uncover new facts through peer discussions. Student centered learning approach prioritizes students as the focal point of the learning process, with teachers taking

on a facilitative role. Students work collaboratively in discussion groups to explore assigned themes, gather and structure relevant materials, and exchange ideas. This model fosters critical thinking, comprehensive understanding of the themes, and collective conclusion-making through group discussions.

The incorporation of critical thinking within the pedagogy of Qur'an Hadith education, as exemplified by MTsN 2 Tulungagung, serves as a paradigm of effective educational methodologies that harmonize traditional values with contemporary pedagogical theories. Through the utilization of literacy activities, higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) inquiries, and learner-centered methodologies, educators cultivate a conducive learning atmosphere that enhances critical and analytical competencies. Ilechukwu (2014) states that Critical thinking will be a very advantageous tool in the religious education classroom because it tends toward the perfect, the good which means striking the balance. Dalimunte & Siregar (2024) further state that, the enhancement of critical thinking competencies can be realized through a variety of methodologies, models, and instructional techniques, encompassing lectures, discussions, question-and-answer sessions, group projects, collaborative endeavors, and inquiry-driven learning. Learners are incentivized to disseminate knowledge among peers via verbal articulations and presentations.

Literacy activities are primarily aimed at enhancing reading, writing, comprehension, and information processing abilities. Students engage in the identification, collection, and organization of information, subsequently participating in peer discussions to deepen their comprehension. This method promotes critical thinking by motivating students to articulate their perspectives and receive constructive feedback from teachers (Romlah et al., 2024). HOTS inquiries are meticulously designed to foster advanced critical thinking competencies, encompassing the analysis and evaluation of information. Such inquiries compel students to apply and integrate their acquired knowledge, culminating in a deeper understanding of Islamic doctrines (Dahari, Suhid, and Fakhruddin, 2019). Engaging with HOTS inquiries facilitates students' ability to relate their learning to real-world contexts, thus augmenting their critical engagement with the subject matter, transcending mere rote memorization (Aziz et al., 2023).

The learner-centered paradigm positions students at the forefront of the educational experience, with educators acting as facilitators rather than authoritative figures in the learning process. Students collaborate within discussion groups, exploring thematic elements and collectively synthesizing information (Dahari, Suhid, and Fakhruddin, 2019; Romlah et al., 2024, and Thornhill-Miller et al., 2023). This instructional model fosters critical thinking through collaborative inquiry and problem-solving, culminating in a holistic understanding of the Qur'an and Hadith. Despite the advantages associated with the integration of critical thinking in Qur'an Hadith education, obstacles persist, such as students' propensity for memorization over profound comprehension. As stated by Klaina (2024), obstacles may impede the cultivation of critical thinking abilities.

In conclusion, the integration of critical thinking into Qur'an Hadith education at MTsN 2 Tulungagung exemplifies an effective balance between traditional religious values and modern pedagogical approaches. By incorporating literacy activities, higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) inquiries, and learner-centered methodologies, educators foster an engaging and intellectually stimulating environment that enhances analytical and critical competencies. These strategies encourage students to process and evaluate information deeply, articulate their ideas, and relate their learning to real-world contexts, promoting a comprehensive understanding of Islamic teachings

## **2. Forms of supports teachers give to students to create a conducive classroom atmosphere.**

In providing support and opportunities for students to develop critical thinking skills, Quran and Hadith teachers play a key role in creating an environment that encourages students to think critically, analyze, and solve problems. Several strategies have been implemented by teachers. One approach is introducing controversial themes in teaching, where students engage with topics that elicit diverse perspectives and encourage meaningful discussion. This method enables students to identify, organize, and articulate their findings, as well as draw conclusions from shared opinions. Another essential strategy is fostering curiosity by encouraging students to ask questions. This practice not only reflects their eagerness to learn but also helps them

explore new ideas and deepen their understanding of the material. By discussing these questions with peers, students clarify concepts, express opinions, and gain a more profound grasp of the subject matter.

Critical thinking skills are further developed through reasoning, where students analyze problems, ask thoughtful questions, and derive conclusions based on evidence. This process reflects their comprehensive understanding of the material and ability to present and support their opinions with facts. Additionally, communication plays a key role, especially in group work, where students enhance their networking and collaborative abilities. By articulating their views, presenting relevant facts, evaluating information, and distinguishing between essential and non-essential details, students can effectively conclude and reflect on the material being taught. These strategies collectively nurture critical thinking and prepare students to approach complex topics with confidence and depth.

A conducive classroom atmosphere is vital for fostering an effective and enjoyable learning environment, particularly in Quran and Hadith education. This atmosphere allows students to feel safe, comfortable, and supported, which enhances their focus, engagement, and motivation to learn. To create such an environment, teachers of Qur'an hadiths implement various strategies. One strategy is class discussion, which encourages students to think critically and express their opinions rationally. Through discussions, students not only gain a better understanding of the material but also develop their ability to articulate ideas, exchange perspectives, and collaboratively conclude discussion outcomes.

Other methods include democratic learning, which promotes student participation in decision-making, sharing viewpoints, and collaborating with peers. This approach encourages freedom of expression, respect for differing opinions, and consensus-building skills. Additionally, TGT (Teams-Games-Tournament) Learning provides students opportunities to work independently and collaboratively, enhancing their ability to discuss and resolve group challenges. Finally, problem-based learning trains students to tackle real-life issues critically. It helps them identify problems, gather relevant materials, exchange ideas, and work towards simple, consensus-driven solutions. Together, these strategies cultivate a supportive and engaging classroom environment that nurtures students' critical thinking and collaborative abilities.

In the realm of Quran and Hadith learning, as exemplified by MTsN 2 Tulungagung, teachers assume a crucial function in cultivating critical thinking competencies among learners. Integrative learning strategies and the infusion approach have been discerned that not only augment students' critical thinking but also establish a nurturing educational milieu that is conducive to cognitive development. The introduction of contentious subjects stimulates student engagement with provocative themes, thereby promoting a multiplicity of viewpoints and rigorous discourse. This pedagogical approach facilitates students in structuring their thoughts and articulating conclusions grounded in collective viewpoints (Ilechukwu, 2014; Junoh et al., 2021, and Apsari, 2016). The encouragement of curiosity and inquiry among students signifies their enthusiasm for learning, which, in turn, enhances their comprehension. Collaborative discussions among peers further elucidate concepts and improve understanding (Thornhill-Miller et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the cultivation of reasoning and evidence-based analysis is paramount, as students refine their critical thinking through the examination of problems and reflective questioning. This methodological approach empowers them to substantiate their assertions with empirical evidence. Furthermore, the promotion of communication and collaboration through group work enriches networking and cooperative skills, enabling students to express their perspectives and critically assess information (Charmichael and Farrell, 2012, and Thorndahl and Stentoft, 2020).

In conclusion, the teachers of MTsN 2 Tulungagung play a pivotal role in fostering critical thinking skills in Quranic and Hadith studies through innovative and integrative pedagogical approaches. By employing strategies such as the infusion approach and introducing contentious topics, they create an engaging learning environment that encourages cognitive growth and the exploration of diverse perspectives. The emphasis on curiosity, collaborative discussions, and evidence-based reasoning not only enhances comprehension but also equips students with the skills to analyze and articulate well-substantiated arguments. Furthermore, fostering communication and teamwork through group activities strengthens students' ability to assess information

critically and engage effectively with their peers, thereby preparing them for a dynamic and interconnected world.

## V. CONCLUSION

The findings and discussions in this article uncovers that teachers do not see critical thinking as a matter of (religious) ontological reflection. Rather, critical thinking facilitates more scientifically precise or more informed understandings of religious phenomena. The integration of critical thinking in Qur'an Hadith education at MTsN 2 Tulungagung demonstrates a successful approach to fostering analytical and reflective skills among students. Through literacy activities, HOTS (Higher-Order Thinking Skills) inquiries, and student-centered learning methods, educators effectively balance Islamic teachings with contemporary educational practices. These strategies enhance students' reading, writing, comprehension, and problem-solving capabilities, enabling them to engage deeply with Islamic doctrines and apply their knowledge to real-world contexts. Additionally, collaborative learning fosters critical discussion, teamwork, and collective understanding. Despite these advancements, challenges such as students' reliance on rote memorization highlight the need for continued refinement of instructional methodologies to fully realize the potential of critical thinking in religious education.

Teachers of Qur'an and Hadith at MTsN 2 Tulungagung play a pivotal role in fostering students' critical thinking skills and creating a supportive classroom atmosphere. They employ various strategies to encourage analytical thinking, problem-solving, and collaborative learning. Key approaches include introducing controversial themes to promote diverse perspectives and in-depth discussions, fostering curiosity through student-generated questions, and developing reasoning skills by guiding students to analyze problems and draw evidence-based conclusions. Group work and communication exercises further enhance students' collaborative abilities, allowing them to express ideas, evaluate information, and engage in meaningful discourse.

To establish a conducive classroom environment, teachers use interactive methods such as class discussions, democratic learning, and problem-based learning. These strategies encourage active participation, freedom of expression, and respect for differing opinions while cultivating consensus-building skills. Innovative approaches like Teams-Games-Tournament (TGT) learning and the infusion of real-life problem-solving exercises enable students to engage critically with the material, work collaboratively, and build confidence in tackling complex topics. By integrating these methods, teachers not only nurture students' critical thinking competencies but also create an engaging and supportive learning atmosphere that aligns with Islamic educational principles and prepares students for real-world challenges.

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