

Decolonizing Islamic Education: Muslim Intellectual Critiques of Western Educational Hegemony during the Colonial Period

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the transformation of Islamic education during the colonial period and the intellectual responses of Muslim scholars to Western educational hegemony through a systematic literature review (SLR). Colonial expansion introduced modern secular schooling systems that significantly reshaped educational institutions in many Muslim societies. These reforms produced a dual educational structure in which Western schools operated alongside traditional Islamic institutions such as madrasah and pesantren, influencing knowledge hierarchies, language policies, and educational authority. Using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) protocol, this study systematically analyzed scholarly publications retrieved from the Scopus database to identify major themes and theoretical perspectives in the literature. The findings reveal four key patterns: the institutional transformation of Islamic education under colonial policies, the emergence of educational dualism, the intellectual responses of Muslim scholars to Western epistemological dominance, and the growing relevance of decolonial perspectives in contemporary educational debates. The review highlights the resilience of Islamic educational institutions in preserving religious knowledge traditions while engaging with modern knowledge. These findings contribute to discussions on the decolonization of education and the development of culturally grounded educational frameworks in Muslim societies.

Introduction

Colonialism significantly reshaped educational systems across many Muslim societies by transforming institutional structures, epistemological orientations, and the sociopolitical roles of education. During the colonial period, Western powers introduced modern secular schooling systems designed primarily to serve administrative and political objectives. These systems often privileged European languages, secular curricula, and bureaucratic training aligned with colonial governance. As a result, educational reforms during colonial rule did not simply modernize educational structures but also reconfigured the hierarchy of knowledge production,

positioning Western epistemology as dominant while marginalizing indigenous and Islamic intellectual traditions (Thang et al., 2024). This transformation created long-lasting implications for how education, knowledge, and authority are organized within Muslim societies.

One of the most notable consequences of colonial educational policy was the emergence of a dual education system, which separated Western-style secular schools from traditional Islamic institutions such as madrasah and pesantren. In colonial Indonesia, for instance, Dutch schools operated using Dutch as the medium of instruction and were designed to produce administrative elites loyal to colonial authorities. In contrast, Islamic institutions continued to operate through community-based networks using local languages and religious curricula. This structural separation created educational inequalities based on race and social status while simultaneously generating a new class of indigenous intellectuals educated within Western frameworks. Ironically, this colonial educational structure also contributed to the rise of nationalist consciousness among local elites who later played crucial roles in anti-colonial movements (Thang et al., 2024).

Despite the hegemonic influence of colonial schooling, Islamic educational institutions demonstrated significant resilience and adaptability. Rather than disappearing under colonial pressure, many institutions recontextualized their roles within Muslim communities. In Indonesia, pesantren functioned not only as centers of religious learning but also as important sites of social solidarity, cultural preservation, and resistance against colonial domination. Historical studies highlight how pesantren strengthened Islamic identity, fostered communal cooperation, and supported alternative economic and social structures that challenged colonial authority. These institutions therefore played a crucial role in sustaining cultural autonomy and shaping intellectual resistance within colonized Muslim societies (Murdianto, 2025).

In recent decades, scholars have increasingly analyzed these historical developments through postcolonial and decolonial frameworks, particularly through the concept of the colonality of knowledge. This perspective emphasizes how colonial power structures continue to shape educational policies, curricula, and knowledge hierarchies even after political independence. Research on decolonial education argues that contemporary educational systems often reproduce colonial epistemic dominance through standardized curricula, language policies, and pedagogical models that privilege Western knowledge systems. Consequently, scholars advocate the integration of local epistemologies, culturally responsive curricula, and community participation to challenge inherited colonial structures in education (Borelli et al., 2020; Brissett, 2018; Sotero et al., 2020; Wescott, 2022).

Although a growing body of literature has examined colonial education policies and the historical development of Islamic educational institutions, existing research remains fragmented across different disciplines such as history, education, and postcolonial studies. Many studies focus on either colonial administrative policies or contemporary educational reform without systematically synthesizing how Muslim intellectuals historically responded to Western educational hegemony and how Islamic educational institutions adapted to these transformations. Consequently, there is still limited integrative understanding of the intellectual, institutional, and epistemological dynamics that shaped Islamic education during and after colonial rule.

To address this gap, this article conducts a systematic literature review (SLR) to synthesize existing scholarship on colonial transformations of Islamic education and Muslim intellectual responses to Western educational dominance. By systematically analyzing the available literature, this study aims to map key themes, theoretical approaches, and scholarly debates surrounding Islamic education in colonial and postcolonial contexts. Specifically, the review seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How did colonial educational policies transform Islamic educational institutions and knowledge systems in Muslim societies?

RQ2: How did Muslim intellectuals and Islamic educational institutions respond to Western educational hegemony during the colonial period?

RQ3: What theoretical frameworks and conceptual approaches have been used in the literature to analyze the decolonization of Islamic education?

By addressing these questions, this review aims to contribute to the growing field of decolonial studies in Islamic education by providing a comprehensive synthesis of existing scholarship. The findings are expected to clarify the historical trajectories of Islamic educational transformation under colonial rule and to identify emerging directions for future research on the decolonization of Muslim education systems. Ultimately, this study seeks to deepen scholarly understanding of how Islamic intellectual traditions and educational institutions have negotiated colonial power structures while shaping contemporary debates on knowledge, identity, and educational reform in Muslim societies.

Method

This study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to synthesize scholarly discussions on the transformation of Islamic education during the colonial period and the intellectual responses of Muslim scholars to Western educational hegemony. A systematic literature review is a structured method for identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing existing research in a transparent and replicable manner (Snyder, 2019). The SLR approach was selected because it provides a rigorous procedure for mapping scholarly debates, identifying research trends, and minimizing potential selection bias in the review process. Compared with traditional narrative reviews, systematic reviews allow researchers to analyze the development of a research field more comprehensively by applying explicit inclusion criteria and systematic search strategies.

This study follows the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) protocol, which is widely recognized as a methodological guideline for conducting and reporting systematic reviews in social science and educational research (Moher et al., 2009; Page et al., 2021). The PRISMA framework enhances methodological transparency by organizing the review process into four main stages: identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and final inclusion of studies. Through these stages, the PRISMA protocol ensures that the selection of literature is conducted systematically, transparently, and in a replicable manner.

The literature search was conducted using the Scopus database because it indexes a wide range of peer-reviewed publications in education, social sciences, and religious studies. Scopus is widely used in systematic reviews due to its comprehensive coverage of international journals and reliable citation indexing. The search strategy was developed using a Boolean query combining key concepts related to Islamic education, colonial education, and decolonial perspectives. The search query was designed to capture variations in terminology frequently used in the literature: (*"Islamic education" OR madrasah OR pesantren OR "Islamic schooling"*) AND (*"colonial education" OR colonialism OR "Western education" OR "educational hegemony"*) AND (*"decolonization" OR "decolonial education" OR "postcolonial education" OR "Muslim intellectuals"*).

The search was conducted on titles, abstracts, and keywords. The retrieved publications were limited to peer-reviewed academic works, including journal articles, book chapters, and conference proceedings written in English. No strict chronological limitation was imposed in order to capture both historical and contemporary scholarship discussing colonial educational transformations in Muslim societies. After the initial search results were obtained, duplicate

records were removed before proceeding to the screening stage.

To ensure the relevance and academic quality of the literature included in the analysis, a set of inclusion and exclusion criteria was applied. These criteria were used during the screening and full-text review stages to determine whether a study was suitable for inclusion in the final dataset.

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criteria Type	Description
Inclusion Criteria	Studies discussing Islamic educational institutions such as madrasah, pesantren, or Islamic schooling systems.
	Research examining colonial education policies or Western educational influence in Muslim societies
	Studies addressing postcolonial, decolonial, or critical perspectives on education
	Peer-reviewed journal articles, books, book chapters, or conference papers
	Publications written in English
Exclusion Criteria	Studies providing theoretical, historical, or empirical analysis relevant to Islamic education
	Publications not related to education or educational institutions
	Studies discussing Islam without addressing educational contexts
	Non-academic publications such as blogs, opinion pieces, or news articles
	Studies lacking sufficient methodological or conceptual discussion
	Publications whose full text could not be accessed

Source: Researcher Data (2026)

Following the PRISMA protocol, the study selection process began with the identification stage, where all records retrieved from the Scopus database were collected. Duplicate entries were removed to avoid redundancy in the dataset. The screening stage involved reviewing the titles and abstracts of the remaining publications to determine their relevance to the topic of Islamic education and colonial educational influence. Articles that clearly did not address educational contexts or Muslim societies were excluded at this stage. The eligibility stage consisted of a full-text assessment of the remaining studies in order to evaluate their conceptual relevance and scholarly rigor. Finally, the inclusion stage resulted in a set of selected studies that were considered suitable for qualitative synthesis in the review.

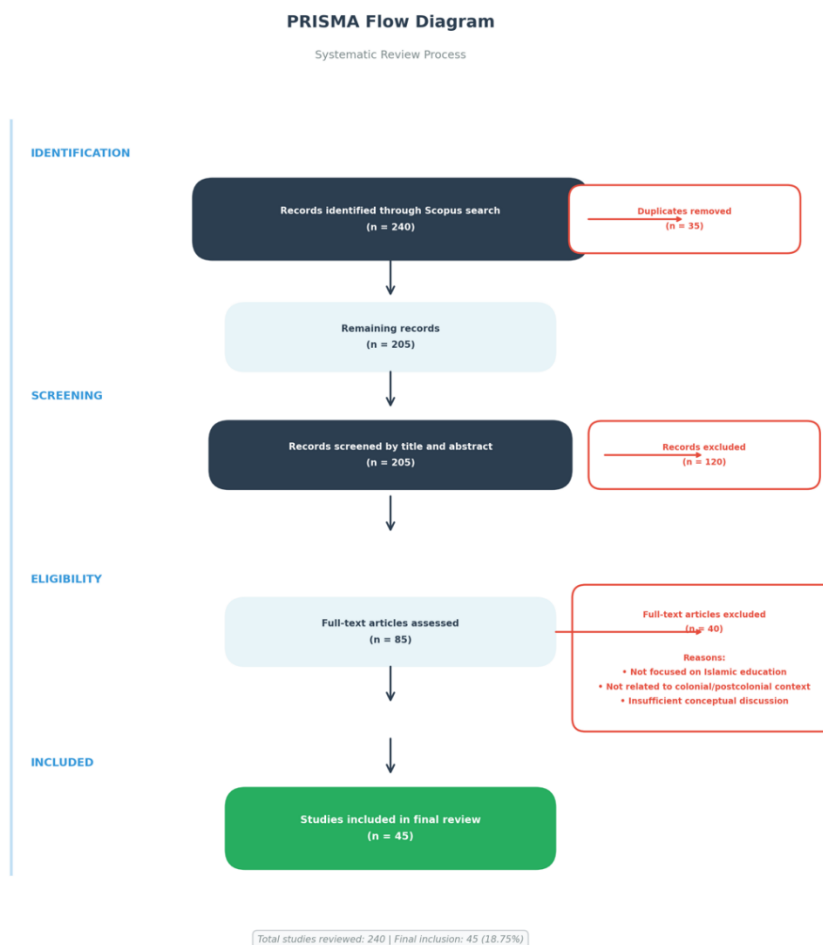


Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram

After the final set of studies was determined, the selected literature was analyzed using a qualitative coding approach to identify recurring themes and conceptual patterns across the literature. The coding process focused on several analytical dimensions, including colonial educational policies, institutional transformation of Islamic education, intellectual responses of Muslim scholars, theoretical frameworks related to postcolonial or decolonial perspectives, and contemporary implications for Islamic education. This thematic coding enabled the study to synthesize diverse scholarly contributions and to map the key debates surrounding colonial influence and intellectual resistance within the field of Islamic education.

Result and Discussion

1. Overview of Selected Studies

Following the PRISMA screening process, a total of 45 studies were included in the final review. These publications consist primarily of peer-reviewed journal articles with a smaller number of book chapters and conference papers addressing Islamic education,

colonial educational policies, and decolonial perspectives in education. The studies span multiple regions, including Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America, reflecting the global relevance of colonial educational transformation and its impact on Muslim educational institutions.

The selected literature represents diverse disciplinary approaches, including educational history, postcolonial studies, religious education, and sociology of education. Methodologically, the studies employ historical analysis, qualitative case studies, theoretical critiques, and comparative educational analysis. Table 1 summarizes several representative studies included in the review.

Table 2. Selected Studies Included in the Systematic Literature Review

Author	Context	Method	Key Findings
Thang et al (2024)	Colonial Indonesia	Historical analysis	Colonial education created a dual education system separating Western schools from indigenous Islamic educational institutions.
Murdianto (2025)	Lombok, Indonesia	Qualitative case study	Pesantren functioned as centers of socio-religious resilience, community solidarity, and cultural resistance during colonial rule.
Borelli et al (2020)	Brazil	Decolonial theoretical study	Decolonial language education challenges epistemic dominance and promotes the recognition of marginalized knowledge systems.
Brissett (2018)	Caribbean	Postcolonial policy analysis	Educational reform must critically address colonial legacies in order to achieve meaningful social transformation.
Sotero et al (2020)	Latin America	Educational ethnography	Integrating local knowledge with scientific knowledge promotes culturally responsive and epistemically inclusive education.
Rodrigues et al (2019)	Brazil	Critical pedagogy analysis	Collaboration with indigenous teachers helps resist epistemic colonialism in educational curricula and practices.
Wescott (2022)	Global education	Critical policy analysis	Evidence-based education policies may reproduce hegemonic knowledge structures if local contexts are ignored.
Suyadi & Widodo (2019)	Indonesia	Educational reform study	Islamic education adapts modern pedagogical approaches while maintaining religious and 2ethical values rooted in Islamic traditions.
Quintriqueo & Arias-Ortega (2019)	Chile	Intercultural education research	Indigenous epistemologies should be integrated into educational curricula to promote intercultural dialogue and epistemic justice.
In'ami et al (2025)	Islamic educational philosophy	Conceptual analysis	Islamic education emphasizes ethical formation grounded in Islamic epistemology and moral development.

Source: Researcher Data (2026)

2. Thematic Synthesis of the Literature

The qualitative synthesis of the selected studies revealed four major themes in the literature regarding Islamic education and colonial educational transformation.

Table 3. Thematic Coding of Selected Studies

Theme	Description	Representative Studies
Colonial Educational Policies	Colonial governments introduced Western-style education systems designed to support administrative control and cultural influence.	Brissett (2018) and Thang et al (2024)
Institutional Transformation of Islamic Education	Islamic institutions such as madrasah and pesantren adapted to colonial structures while maintaining religious and cultural identities.	Murdianto (2025) and Suyadi & Widodo (2019)
Muslim Intellectual Responses	Muslim scholars developed educational reform ideas integrating Islamic knowledge with modern sciences.	In'ami et al (2025) and Suyadi & Widodo (2019)
Decolonial and Postcolonial Perspectives	Scholars analyze educational transformation through postcolonial and decolonial frameworks emphasizing epistemic justice.	Borelli et al (2020) and Rodrigues et al (2019)
Contemporary Implications for Islamic Education	Current educational debates focus on decolonizing curricula and integrating local epistemologies into modern education systems.	Quintriqueo & Arias-Ortega (2019), Sotero et al (2020), and Wescott (2022)

Source: Researcher Data (2026)

a. Colonial Educational Policies and the Emergence of Dual Educational Systems

A dominant theme in the literature concerns how colonial governments introduced Western-style schooling systems that operated parallel to existing Islamic educational institutions. Colonial education policies often aimed to produce administrative personnel and cultural intermediaries who could support colonial governance. As a result, many colonized societies experienced the emergence of dual educational systems, where Western secular schools operated alongside traditional religious institutions.

Research on colonial Indonesia highlights how Dutch colonial policies established schools using Dutch as the language of instruction while Islamic institutions continued to teach religious subjects in local languages (Thang et al., 2024). This division structured educational access along racial and social hierarchies and produced new forms of intellectual stratification within colonized societies.

b. Institutional Adaptation and Cultural Resilience of Islamic Education

Despite the dominance of colonial educational structures, Islamic educational institutions demonstrated significant adaptability and resilience. Rather than disappearing, many institutions redefined their roles within Muslim communities. Studies on pesantren in Indonesia show that these institutions functioned not only as religious schools but also as centers of social organization, cultural preservation, and economic cooperation.

Murdianto (2025) demonstrates how pesantren networks in Lombok contributed to community solidarity and socio-religious independence during the colonial era. Through religious leadership, communal cooperation, and economic initiatives, pesantren

provided alternative frameworks for sustaining Islamic identity and resisting colonial cultural domination.

c. Muslim Intellectual Responses to Western Educational Hegemony

Another important theme emerging from the literature concerns the intellectual responses of Muslim scholars to colonial educational dominance. Many Muslim intellectuals sought to reinterpret Islamic education in ways that could engage with modern knowledge while preserving Islamic epistemological foundations.

Scholars advocating Islamic educational reform emphasized the integration of religious knowledge with modern sciences while maintaining ethical and spiritual values rooted in Islamic tradition. Studies such as Suyadi & Widodo (2019) highlight how Islamic educational reform movements attempted to reconcile modern pedagogical methods with Islamic moral philosophy, reflecting broader intellectual debates within Muslim societies.

d. Decolonial and Postcolonial Perspectives in Education

Recent scholarship increasingly interprets the transformation of Islamic education through postcolonial and decolonial theoretical frameworks. These perspectives emphasize the persistence of colonial epistemic hierarchies within contemporary educational systems. Scholars argue that many educational reforms continue to reproduce Western epistemological dominance through standardized curricula, language policies, and pedagogical models.

Studies in decolonial education emphasize the importance of integrating local epistemologies, indigenous knowledge systems, and culturally responsive teaching methods into educational curricula. Borelli et al (2020) argue that decolonial pedagogies can challenge hegemonic knowledge structures by prioritizing marginalized epistemologies and community-based knowledge. Similarly, research on intercultural education highlights the importance of bridging local and scientific knowledge to promote epistemic justice in education (Sotero et al., 2020).

Overall, the literature demonstrates that colonialism fundamentally transformed Islamic educational systems by introducing Western institutional models and epistemological hierarchies. However, Islamic educational institutions and Muslim intellectuals actively responded to these transformations through processes of adaptation, resistance, and intellectual reform. Contemporary debates on the decolonization of education build upon these historical dynamics, emphasizing the importance of epistemic pluralism and culturally grounded educational frameworks.

Discussion

The findings of this systematic literature review demonstrate that colonial educational policies significantly reshaped Islamic educational institutions by transforming both institutional structures and epistemological hierarchies within Muslim societies. One of the most consistent patterns identified in the literature is the emergence of a dual education system in which Western-style secular schooling coexisted with traditional Islamic educational institutions such as madrasah and pesantren. This institutional division can be interpreted through the perspective of cultural hegemony, which explains how dominant groups maintain power not only through political authority but also through the normalization of particular forms of knowledge and cultural values as universally legitimate (Alaka, 2025; Balakrishnan, 2017; Baykal, 2025; H.M., 2023; Khan et al., 2025; Leonardo et al., 2023; Ntloedibe, 2025; Ojha & Tarakad Venkateswaran, 2022; Sharma, 2021; Ul-Haq, 2021; Woldegiorgis, 2021). Within colonial contexts, Western education functioned as an ideological instrument that disseminated European epistemological frameworks, administrative rationality, and secular intellectual traditions, thereby institutionalizing Western knowledge as the dominant paradigm in formal education systems (Suyadi & Widodo, 2019; Thang et al., 2024).

However, the emergence of educational dualism should not be understood merely as an administrative consequence of colonial educational policies. Rather, it represents a deeper transformation in the hierarchy of knowledge production and intellectual authority. By privileging secular scientific knowledge and European languages as the primary medium of instruction, colonial education contributed to the marginalization of indigenous and religious knowledge systems. This phenomenon aligns with the concept of the coloniality of knowledge, which emphasizes that colonial power extended beyond territorial domination to shape global structures of epistemology and intellectual legitimacy (Aksakalli, 2025; Borelli et al., 2020; Cushing, 2023; Jules & Salajan, 2025; Kim & Jung, 2025; Rodrigues et al., 2019). From this perspective, the colonial education system did not simply introduce new institutional forms but also restructured the epistemic foundations of education by positioning Western knowledge as the universal standard of modernity and progress.

Despite the hegemonic influence of colonial educational structures, the literature reviewed in this study demonstrates that Islamic educational institutions developed various forms of institutional resilience and intellectual adaptation. Traditional institutions such as pesantren and madrasah maintained their roles as centers of religious learning and cultural identity even under colonial pressures. More importantly, these institutions did not merely preserve religious traditions but also functioned as alternative intellectual spaces where Islamic epistemology, ethical education, and community-based knowledge systems continued to evolve (Murdianto, 2025; Bilgiler et al., 2023; Fatwa & Maula, 2025; Mariyono, 2024; Mikail, 2022; Mumtaz et al., 2024; Muthohirin, 2025; Suwendi, 2004; Tayeb, 2024; Ubaidila et al., 2025). In many Muslim societies, pesantren networks strengthened communal solidarity, preserved cultural autonomy, and supported forms of social organization that challenged the cultural dominance of colonial institutions.

The intellectual responses of Muslim scholars further illustrate the dynamic interaction between Islamic educational traditions and Western educational influence. Rather than rejecting modern education entirely, many Muslim reformers attempted to reinterpret Islamic educational principles in ways that could engage with modern scientific knowledge while preserving the ethical and epistemological foundations of Islamic intellectual tradition. Contemporary scholarship on Islamic educational philosophy emphasizes that knowledge within the Islamic worldview integrates ethical, spiritual, and intellectual dimensions rather than separating them into purely secular domains (In'ami et al., 2025; Suyadi & Widodo, 2019). This perspective suggests that Islamic epistemology offers an alternative conceptual framework for education, where the acquisition of knowledge is closely connected with moral formation, spiritual development, and social responsibility. Consequently, the reformulation of Islamic education during the colonial and postcolonial periods can be interpreted as an attempt to reconstruct educational systems that integrate modern knowledge while maintaining Islamic epistemological values.

Recent developments in decolonial and intercultural education scholarship further expand this discussion by emphasizing the importance of epistemic pluralism in contemporary educational reform. Decolonial scholars argue that meaningful educational transformation requires the recognition of multiple knowledge traditions rather than privileging a single epistemological framework (Borelli et al., 2020; Rodrigues et al., 2019; Wescott, 2022). Research on intercultural education similarly highlights the importance of integrating local knowledge systems, indigenous epistemologies, and culturally responsive pedagogies into formal educational structures (Quintriqueo & Arias-Ortega, 2019; Sotero et al., 2020). In the context of Islamic education, these perspectives suggest that the decolonization of education should involve not only curricular reform but also a broader reconsideration of the epistemological foundations that shape educational practices.

Overall, the transformation of Islamic education during the colonial period should therefore be understood as a complex interaction between colonial power structures, local

intellectual traditions, and evolving educational practices. Colonialism introduced institutional disruptions and epistemological hierarchies, yet these transformations also stimulated intellectual debates and educational reforms within Muslim societies. Islamic educational institutions and Muslim intellectuals did not merely react to colonial influence but actively negotiated the relationship between modernity, tradition, and epistemic autonomy. These historical negotiations remain highly relevant in contemporary discussions of educational reform, particularly as scholars and policymakers increasingly advocate for decolonial approaches that promote epistemic diversity and culturally grounded educational frameworks within Muslim educational systems.

Conclusion

This systematic literature review demonstrates that colonialism significantly reshaped Islamic educational systems by introducing Western institutional models, epistemological hierarchies, and administrative structures that altered the traditional organization of knowledge in Muslim societies. Colonial educational policies often produced a dual educational system in which Western secular schools coexisted with traditional Islamic institutions such as madrasah and pesantren. Through the lens of cultural hegemony and coloniality of knowledge, the literature reveals how Western educational frameworks became dominant in shaping curricula, language policies, and pedagogical models, frequently marginalizing indigenous and religious knowledge traditions. Nevertheless, the review also highlights the resilience of Islamic educational institutions, which maintained their roles as centers of religious learning, cultural identity, and community solidarity despite colonial pressures.

At the same time, the findings indicate that Muslim intellectuals and educational institutions actively engaged with these transformations through processes of adaptation, critique, and reform. Rather than rejecting modern education entirely, many scholars sought to reconcile modern scientific knowledge with the ethical and epistemological foundations of Islamic intellectual tradition. Contemporary discussions on the decolonization of education therefore emphasize the importance of epistemic pluralism, the integration of local knowledge systems, and culturally grounded pedagogical approaches. These perspectives suggest that future development of Islamic education should not merely replicate Western educational models but should instead foster educational frameworks that balance global knowledge engagement with the preservation of Islamic epistemological values and local sociocultural contexts.

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