

**From Memorization to Moral Formation: Applying Al-Attas's Ta'dīb–Adab Framework to
Islamiat Education in Pakistan**

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ABSTRACT

Islamiat occupies a central place in Pakistan's school system and is officially intended to cultivate moral consciousness, ethical reasoning, and value-oriented citizenship. Despite these aims, a growing body of literature suggests that classroom delivery of Islamiat often remains dominated by rote memorization, textbook dependency, and examination-oriented practices (Bhatti & Chaudhary, 2023; Tahir et al., 2022). This creates a persistent gap between the normative objectives of the subject and the lived pedagogical experience of students. This paper offers a literature-based analytical study that reconsiders Islamiat education in Pakistan through the educational philosophy of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, particularly his concepts of ta'dīb and adab (Al-Attas, 1991, 1995). It argues that contemporary Islamiat instruction has focused excessively on content transmission while neglecting character formation, reflective reasoning, and the ethical ordering of knowledge. Drawing on scholarship on Islamic education, moral pedagogy, and Pakistan's schooling system, the paper develops a conceptual framework for reimagining Islamiat as a transformative subject rather than a merely examinable one. The study contributes to debates on Islamic education, postcolonial schooling, and values-based reform in Pakistan.

Keywords: *Islamiat education, Pakistan, Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, ta'dīb, adab, moral education, pedagogy*

INTRODUCTION

Education is never a neutral enterprise. It transmits not only information, but also assumptions about human purpose, authority, morality, and social order (Freire, 1970). This is particularly true for religious education, where the stated objective extends beyond academic competence toward the formation of ethical and spiritually conscious individuals. In Pakistan, Islamiat has historically occupied such a role. As a compulsory subject across schooling systems, it is expected to cultivate moral discipline, civic responsibility, Islamic identity, and value-based conduct among students (Government of Pakistan, 2020).

Yet the practical reality of Islamiat education presents a more complex picture. Existing studies repeatedly indicate that classroom instruction is often shaped by memorization of textual material, reliance on guidebooks, formulaic examination preparation, and teacher-centered delivery (Bhatti & Chaudhary, 2023). Under such conditions, students may learn definitions, verses, or model answers without necessarily developing moral reasoning, reflective understanding, or durable ethical habits. The result is a tension between what Islamiat is supposed to achieve and what it often achieves in practice.

This tension is not unique to Pakistan, but it is particularly significant in a context where education is frequently expected to address broader concerns about social cohesion, citizenship, moral decline, and identity formation. Reforms such as the Single National Curriculum sought greater standardization and coherence, yet debates continue regarding whether structural reforms have sufficiently addressed pedagogy, teacher preparation, and classroom culture (Government of Pakistan, 2020; Jan, 2022). Curriculum content alone cannot guarantee moral education if the mode of teaching reproduces passivity and instrumental learning.

This paper argues that one reason for the recurring weakness of Islamiat instruction is the overemphasis on content transmission at the expense of educational philosophy. Put differently, policymakers and institutions have often focused on *what* should be taught while paying inadequate attention to *how* and *why* it should be taught. To address this gap, the paper revisits the educational philosophy of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, one of the most influential contemporary Muslim thinkers on knowledge and education. His concepts of *ta'dīb* (disciplined ethical education) and *adab* (proper recognition, right conduct, and moral order) provide a normative lens through which current Islamiat pedagogy may be reassessed (Al-Attas, 1991, 1995).

Unlike narrow instructional models, Al-Attas conceptualizes education as the cultivation of the whole person. Knowledge is not merely accumulated information but must be properly ordered and translated into just conduct. The teacher is not only an instructor but a moral exemplar. Learning is not reducible to examination performance but linked to intellectual discipline, spiritual awareness, and ethical practice (Hashim, 1996; Wallace, 1998). These principles offer an important contrast to rote-oriented educational cultures.

The objective of this paper is therefore two-fold. First, it reviews the literature on Islamiat education in Pakistan and identifies major pedagogical limitations. Second, it outlines Al-Attas's *ta'dīb-adab* philosophy as a relevant theoretical framework for Islamic schooling while conducting an analytical discussion in the context of Pakistan by applying the respective analytical framework.

The significance of the paper lies in two areas. Academically, it bridges literature on Pakistan's education system with Islamic philosophy of education, fields often discussed separately. Practically, it offers a framework for teacher training, curriculum delivery, and assessment reform that moves beyond symbolic attachment to moral education toward concrete pedagogical renewal.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Islamiat Education in Pakistan: Between Normative Purpose and Classroom Reality

Religious education in Pakistan has long been linked to nation-building, moral development, and identity formation. Since independence, Islamiat has remained a compulsory subject intended to familiarize students with core Islamic beliefs, ethics, and civic responsibilities (Rahman, 2004). Policy discourse frequently presents the subject as central to developing disciplined and socially responsible citizens (Government of Pakistan, 2020). However, the practical implementation of these ambitions has faced persistent criticism.

A recurring finding in the literature is the dominance of rote learning within school culture. Students often prepare for examinations through memorized answers rather than conceptual engagement. This broader pedagogical pattern affects multiple subjects, including Islamiat, where success may become associated with recall of textbook material rather than internalization of ethical meaning (Bhatti & Chaudhary, 2023; Tahir et al., 2022). When religious knowledge is reduced to examinable content, the distinction between learning *about* values and learning *to live by* values becomes significant.

Scholars have also noted the prevalence of teacher-centered methods in many Pakistani classrooms. Traditional lecture styles, limited questioning, and hierarchical teacher-student relations can constrain reflective dialogue. In the context of Islamiyat, such methods may communicate obedience more effectively than moral reasoning. Students may come to view the subject as static information rather than an intellectually relevant guide to contemporary ethical life.

Another issue concerns instrumental attitudes toward schooling. In highly competitive academic environments, students often prioritize subjects perceived as decisive for careers or higher education. Religious education may consequently be marginalized, valued symbolically but treated practically as secondary. This can generate low engagement, strategic studying before examinations, and limited long-term retention (Malik et al., 2020).

These concerns do not imply that Islamiyat lacks value or that all classrooms function similarly. Rather, they indicate structural tendencies within broader schooling culture. Many dedicated teachers attempt to make the subject meaningful through discussion, examples, and pastoral guidance. However, systemic pressures such as overloaded syllabi, time constraints, examination regimes, and uneven teacher training frequently limit such efforts (Jan, 2022).

Moral Education and the Limits of Content-Centered Reform

Global scholarship on moral education increasingly emphasizes that ethical development cannot be secured through curriculum statements alone. Values are learned through institutional culture, repeated practice, adult modeling, dialogue, and opportunities for judgment (Lickona, 1991). Students observe how teachers behave, how rules are enforced, and whether schools embody fairness, respect, and responsibility.

This insight has direct relevance for Islamiyat education. A curriculum may contain excellent moral themes like honesty, justice, compassion, accountability, yet fail to shape conduct if pedagogy remains mechanical. Moral education requires habituation, reflection, and credible exemplars. When assessment rewards memorization more than judgment, schools risk producing students who can state virtues without practicing them (Nucci & Narvaez, 2008).

Research on character education similarly highlights the importance of integration across the school environment. Ethical learning is strongest when values are reinforced across subjects, peer relations, and institutional norms rather than confined to one weekly lesson (Berkowitz & Bier, 2007). This suggests that expecting Islamiyat alone to solve wider moral concerns is unrealistic unless broader school culture is aligned.

Islamic Educational Thought and Contemporary Relevance

Modern discussions of Islamic education often respond to the fragmentation produced by colonial and secular models of schooling. Several Muslim scholars have argued that education in Muslim societies became overly divided between “religious” and “worldly” knowledge, producing intellectual and moral discontinuities (Ashraf, 1985; Nasr, 1989).

Among these thinkers, Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas stands out for offering a systematic philosophy of education rooted in metaphysics, ethics, and epistemology. Rather than treating education as technical training, he views it as the disciplined cultivation of persons capable of recognizing truth and acting justly (Al-Attas, 1991). His framework is especially relevant because it directly addresses the relationship between knowledge, conduct, and civilization.

While Al-Attas has been widely discussed in theoretical literature, comparatively little work has operationalized his ideas for mainstream school pedagogy in contexts such as Pakistan (Wallace, 1998). This creates an opening for analytical application rather than mere philosophical commentary.

Gap in Existing Literature

The literature reveals three important gaps.

First, much research critiques Pakistan's schooling system or curriculum design but pays insufficient attention to Islamiyat pedagogy specifically.

Secondly, there is limited integration between educational reform debates in Pakistan and broader Islamic pedagogical frameworks.

This paper addresses these gaps by using Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas as an analytical lens for evaluating current Islamiyat education and imagining practical reform.

Theoretical Framework: Al-Attas's Ta'dīb–Adab Philosophy of Education

Among contemporary Muslim scholars of education, Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas remains one of the most systematic thinkers to link knowledge, ethics, and civilization. His educational philosophy emerged partly as a response to the fragmentation of modern schooling, where knowledge is often detached from moral purpose and technical competence is privileged over character formation (Yunita, 2025). For Al-Attas, the crisis of Muslim education is not merely curricular weakness but the loss of *adab*, a disorder in recognizing the proper place of knowledge, authority, self, and social responsibility.

Ta'dīb as the Proper Meaning of Education

Al-Attas's concept of ta'dīb transcends the conventional boundaries of education by emphasizing a holistic process that intertwines intellectual cultivation with moral refinement. Unlike ta'līm, which focuses primarily on the transmission of factual knowledge, or tarbiyah, which centers on the broader development and nurturing of the individual, ta'dīb integrates these dimensions into a unified framework aimed at shaping the learner's character and ethical sensibilities. This process is not merely about acquiring information but about internalizing values that guide one's judgment, behavior, and sense of justice. The ultimate goal of ta'dīb is the formation of a well-rounded, civilized human being who embodies both knowledge and virtue, reflecting a deep moral consciousness that informs all aspects of life (Al-Attas, 1991; Dahlan, 2022).

In the context of Islamiyat classrooms, this distinction carries significant pedagogical implications (al-Attas, 1991). The prevalent emphasis on rote memorization and factual recall often overlooks the transformative potential of education as envisaged by ta'dīb (al-Attas, 1991; Wan Daud, 1998). True educational success in this framework is measured not by the quantity of information retained but by the learner's ethical growth and ability to apply knowledge in ways that promote discipline, justice, and moral integrity (al-Attas, 1991). Thus, educators are encouraged to move beyond conventional assessment methods and foster an environment where knowledge actively shapes the learner's character and social responsibility (Niyozov & Memon, 2011). This approach aligns education with its broader purpose of nurturing individuals who contribute positively to society, embodying the values central to Islamic teachings and human civilization (al-Attas, 1991).

Adab as Moral and Epistemic Order

The concept of *adab* is frequently misunderstood as merely referring to etiquette, manners, or socially acceptable behavior. However, within al-Attas's educational philosophy, *adab* carries a far more comprehensive and profound meaning. It signifies the proper recognition and acknowledgment of the rightful place of things within the order of existence, including the hierarchy of knowledge, the responsibilities of the self, the rights of others, and the relationship between human beings and moral truth (Ahmed, 2016). In this sense, *adab* is both an ethical and epistemological concept. It requires learners to value truth over personal convenience, to approach knowledge with humility rather than arrogance, to exercise discipline in speech, conduct, and behavior, and to uphold justice in interactions with others. It also demands responsibility in translating knowledge into action, so that learning becomes visible through character and practice rather than remaining confined to words or examinations (Al-Attas, 1991). Applied educationally, *adab* transforms the classroom into a moral space where respect, sincerity, intellectual honesty, and ethical consistency are cultivated. Consequently, an Islamiat classroom that verbally promotes honesty while simultaneously rewarding rote memorization, superficial performance, or shortcuts to marks reflects an internal contradiction. Such a setting may transmit religious information, but it fails to embody *adab*, because the educational process itself does not align with the moral values it claims to teach.

Teacher as Moral Exemplar

Al-Attas's conception of the teacher transcends the traditional role of merely delivering content; instead, the teacher is envisioned as a *mu'addib*, an ethical guide who nurtures discipline, wisdom, and moral refinement in students (al-Attas, 1991). This role emphasizes the importance of the teacher's personal character traits - such as fairness, sincerity, and the manner of interaction - as integral components of effective pedagogy (Al-Attas, 1991). The teacher's behavior and disposition are not ancillary but central to the educational process, shaping the learner's development holistically rather than focusing solely on cognitive transmission. This perspective aligns closely with contemporary educational research, which highlights the significance of teacher modeling in students' moral and ethical growth (Kristjánsson, 2017). Modern studies affirm that students internalize social and moral norms not only through explicit instruction but also by observing the attitudes and behaviors of authority figures such as teachers (Kristjánsson, 2017; Berkowitz & Bier, 2007). Consequently, this creates a meaningful convergence between Islamic pedagogical theory and modern educational psychology, underscoring the universal importance of the teacher's role as a moral exemplar and ethical mentor in fostering character development (al-Attas, 1991; Kristjánsson, 2017).

Unity of Knowledge and Action

A central critique of modern education systems is the disconnect between theoretical knowledge and practical application. Students may intellectually grasp civic values yet fail to embody them in their behavior, revealing a gap between knowing what is right and doing what is right. Al-Attas challenges this dichotomy by emphasizing that true education must integrate knowledge with *'amal* (right action). Without this synthesis, education remains superficial and incomplete, as it neglects the transformation of knowledge into ethical conduct and responsible living (Hadi, 2025).

In the context of Islamiat education, this philosophy implies that success should extend beyond conventional metrics such as examination grades. Instead, it should be evaluated through the development of reflective judgment, ethical reasoning, and the actual practice of moral responsibility in daily life. This approach encourages students not only to internalize Islamic principles intellectually but also to manifest them through conscious, deliberate actions that contribute to personal growth and societal well-being. Thus, education becomes a holistic process aimed at cultivating both the mind and character, ensuring that learning translates into meaningful and responsible living (Bermi et al., 2024; Pring, 2001).

Relevance to Pakistan

Pakistan's Islamiyat system frequently emphasizes syllabus coverage, textual reproduction, and exam performance. Al-Attas's framework offers an alternative evaluative standard:

Current Dominant Logic	Ta'dīb-Adab Logic
Memorization	Meaningful understanding
Marks orientation	Character formation
Teacher as lecturer	Teacher as exemplar
Passive learning	Reflective engagement
Information recall	Knowledge-action integration

This framework therefore serves as both critique and constructive model.

ANALYTICAL DISCUSSION: APPLYING THE FRAMEWORK TO ISLAMIAT EDUCATION IN PAKISTAN

From Content Saturation to Moral Thinness

Pakistan's Islamiyat curriculum contains substantial moral content like honesty, justice, compassion, accountability, social duty; yet studies indicate that presence of moral themes does not guarantee internalization (Tahir et al., 2022). Where pedagogy is mechanical, rich content can produce thin outcomes. This reveals a central policy mistake: assuming curriculum content automatically produces character. It does not. Delivery mechanisms matter.

Examination Culture as Structural Distortion

Assessment systems strongly shape teaching behavior. Where exams reward predictable reproduction, teachers rationally prioritize memorization drills, model answers, and surface learning. Research on Pakistan's schooling systems shows that examination pressure remains a defining feature of classroom practice (Malik et al., 2020). From an Al-Attasian lens, this creates epistemic distortion: students learn that the purpose of religious knowledge is marks acquisition rather than moral orientation.

The Marginalization of Reflective Reasoning

Many students encounter Islamiyat as settled information rather than a space for guided ethical inquiry. Yet adolescents face contemporary moral questions involving digital behavior, consumerism, gender interaction, civic duty, misinformation, and social justice. A purely static pedagogy leaves them underprepared. Recent educational research stresses dialogic and inquiry-based methods as key to deeper learning and moral reasoning (Murphy et al., 2021). Islamiyat classrooms that prohibit questioning may secure compliance while weakening comprehension.

Teacher Constraints, Not Only Teacher Failure

It would be analytically weak to place responsibility for ineffective Islamiyat pedagogy solely on individual teachers. While teacher practices certainly matter, many instructors operate within structural conditions that

significantly constrain pedagogical innovation and meaningful classroom engagement. In numerous schools, teachers are required to complete overloaded syllabi within limited academic timeframes, leaving little room for reflection, discussion, or experiential learning. Many also receive insufficient professional training in contemporary teaching methods, classroom ethics, or values-based pedagogy, particularly in subjects such as Islamiyat that are often assumed to require content knowledge alone (Bhatti & Chaudhary, 2023).

In addition, time pressure created by examination schedules, administrative performance targets, and institutional demands often pushes teachers toward rapid content coverage rather than deep learning. Large class sizes further reduce the possibility of individualized attention, dialogic teaching, or sustained moral mentoring, while exam expectations encourage a narrow focus on predictable answers and memorization strategies (Malik et al., 2020). Under such circumstances, weak pedagogy frequently reflects flaws in systemic design rather than simple teacher incompetence or unwillingness. Therefore, any serious effort to reform Islamiyat education must move beyond blaming teacher attitudes and instead address institutional structures through curriculum rationalization, teacher development, assessment reform, and supportive school environments that enable meaningful teaching practices.

Public vs Private Sector Dynamics

Different schooling systems in Pakistan may reproduce similar weaknesses in Islamiyat education, although these weaknesses often appear in different forms depending on institutional context. In many public or Matric-sector schools, Islamiyat instruction is frequently shaped by rigid syllabus requirements, centralized textbook dependency, overcrowded classrooms, and limited material resources, all of which can encourage teacher-centered delivery and exam-oriented teaching practices (Government of Pakistan, 2020; Bhatti & Chaudhary, 2023). Under such conditions, teachers may prioritize completion of prescribed content over reflective discussion or moral application. By contrast, elite or private schools often possess comparatively stronger infrastructure, smaller class sizes, and greater pedagogical flexibility, which can create space for discussion-based and student-centered learning approaches (Malik et al., 2020). However, in these settings Islamiyat may sometimes be treated as a lower-status subject when compared with science, mathematics, business, or internationally marketable disciplines, reducing the seriousness with which students and institutions engage with its moral and intellectual aims. As a result, one system may suffer primarily from instructional rigidity, while another may experience moral marginalization through institutional neglect. Neither condition automatically fulfills the deeper educational vision of *ta'dīb*, which requires not only efficient teaching methods but also sincere commitment to ethical formation, proper ordering of knowledge, and the integration of learning with character development (Al-Attas, 1980).

CONCLUSION

The challenge facing Islamiyat education in Pakistan lies not in the presence of moral content but in the ineffective methods used to teach it. Instead of fostering genuine character development, the subject often reduces to rote memorization, which undermines its transformative potential. This issue highlights a fundamental misunderstanding within the educational system, where the accumulation of information is mistaken for true education. Such an approach fails to engage students in meaningful ethical reflection or practical application, rendering the subject ceremonial rather than formative.

Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas's philosophy of *ta'dīb-adab* offers a vital corrective by emphasizing education as the disciplined cultivation of individuals whose knowledge is both ethically grounded and actively embodied. Implementing this philosophy in Pakistan does not require a nostalgic or superficial Islamization of the curriculum but calls for a substantive shift in pedagogical practice. Effective reform must focus on how Islamiyat is taught in classrooms, moving away from memorization toward fostering moral

awareness and personal growth. Only through this reorientation can Islamiat achieve its intended role as a catalyst for ethical transformation rather than remaining a symbolic exercise.

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