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Cinemasophia in John de Rantau's *Denias: Senandung di Atas Awan*

Through his film John de Rantau has evoked wisdom through the visuals which gives a deeper meaning to the need of education. These are visualized through archetypical, traditional and modern symbols which arouse long-forgotten instincts and much neglected links with nature. The visuals used by de Rantau are treasures that please the eyes and go deep into the heart. For every deprived child, there is hope; for every lost soul there is home. This film is inspirational, done with a sensitivity which goes beyond the realm of reality; for the reality is not the present but in the search of knowledge of the Truth, which is what Denias finds. The Truth is there to be discovered but not without its challenges and hardships as faced by young Denias in his desire to be educated. For Denias it all begins with belief in his 'self'.

You shall certainly travel from stage to stage.

(Qur'an, *Al-Inshiqâq*, p. 19).

Man's perception is limited to the reality that surrounds him, until and unless he looks beyond the reality of his environment, to understand his potential which ultimately leads to his destiny, as the things of this world are never proportionate to the actual range of man's wisdom. This perception is attainable only when man attunes it with nature, which is his immediate environment and beyond, towards the metaphysical. The predicament of man, made in the image of Denias, an image from which he has fallen, and to which he must return on his way to the final reintegration into his Divine Source. As a director, John de Rantau as the *dalang*, plays god in projecting archetype symbols in showing Denias' progress from darkness to light; this 'light' that can only be realised through 'darkness'. Although *Denias: Senandung di Atas Awan* (2006) is only his second film it has bestowed John de Rantau accolades within his country and abroad. To name a few, he won awards for Best Movie and Best Actor at the Indonesian Film Festival (2006), Humanity Award

(2006), Best Ethnic Movie at the Bali International Film Festival (2007), and Best Children's Film at the Asia-Pacific Screen Award (2007). His first film, *Mencari Madonna* was scripted by renowned director, Garin Nugroho Riyanto, with seventeen titles to his credit. The strong vision and visual aesthetics of Nugroho Riyanto must have been influenced many young Indonesian directors including John de Rantau in his choices of visual narrative in *Denias: Senandung di Atas Awan*. Under the message of pursuing education for the underprivileged in Indonesia, there is a veritable treasure of primordial symbolism and wisdom in this film; 'Sophia' as internal wisdom through film, or 'cinemasophia'. Film as a modern creative art form has the power of the shaman to extend "our inner and ancient consciousness" (Hill, pp. 18-19). Through the spiritual element it becomes, "...the communication between God and man" (Hill, p. 10). To him:

The filmmakers, as cosmic travelers, as makers of cinemasophia, have transcended historical time to some degree and have intuitively participated in the eternal return. (p. 36)

De Rantau's participation in the 'eternal return' shall be translated in reference to Islamic perspectives, supported by various Oriental Traditions. Primordial symbols are linked to nature are archetypes that are present in the narrative of *Denias: Senandung di Atas Awan*. The search for the Truth (*al-Haqq*) in nature, in the 'self' of Denias is associated with the surrounding symbols of nature which lends a celestial meaning to the film told in a story of the struggles of a young boy, Denias, from the Moni tribe in interior Papua. Based on a true story of a boy from Indonesian Papua named Janias, this film was shot on location in the island of Cendrawasih.

Children of the Moni tribe are educated by teachers who are sent in from the mainland in Indonesia. The school is a make-shift hut with a thatched roof and has no walls. Parents see no future for the children and sees education as unimportant. Only the rich, like the son of the Chief, gets the opportunity for a formal education. The children are more interested in playing soccer and going into the jungle to hunt, like Denias and his friends. Yet, Denias has the capacity to learn and the teacher and Maleo recognise this. Denias' mother is probably the only person from the village who wants Denias to get an education. Denias is not only tied by his boyhood but the beliefs and customs of his village.

In the village the main characters supporting Denias' are his mother, Maleo, an army officer on rest and recreation in the village, and Denias'

first teacher. They are sources of encouragement for him. In the town are Sam Koalbas, the teacher who fights the system to get Denias enrolled in a proper school, and Angel, the first person in the 'town school' he meets, who is kind to him and supportive of his desire to get an education. Denias also befriends Enos, who teaches him to survive in the 'big city'. Nonetheless, Denias' enthusiasm lends encouragement to Enos who decides to return to school. Noel is the antagonist who lands Denias in trouble by picking fights from the time they were in the village till the time Denias finds his way to the school in town. The secondary 'antagonists' are Denias' father, who denies him school over chores, and the villagers who do not see a future in educating their children.

The tale of "Jack and the Beanstalk" told to Denias by his first teacher reflects the 'spirit' of Jack which is inherent in Denias. The teacher recognises this and encourages Denias to realize his true 'self' after he lands in another fight with Noel. The seed planted by Jack is symbolic of the 'seed' planted in Denias' heart for him to see the Truth. It represents a 'climb' whereby each transmutation of Denias can be linked to various symbols in nature towards realizing this 'self'. His major inspiration is his mother who wants to see Denias get an education; the main barrier he has to overcome is the mountain that looms and separates him from getting to the nearest town to get a formal education. But lesser 'evils' are present before Denias can make the paradigm shift. The clouds that blur his vision of the mountain; the full moon; the still water of the lake; the tree; the rainbow – all are archetypal symbols present in the film.

As the title of the film suggests, clouds (*awan*) is a major symbol which suggests the layers of barriers that blurs the 'light' to be reached by Denias, as advocated in the chorus of the theme song:

Dari balik awan ku lihat cahaya
Dari balik awan ke dengar jawapan
Dari balik awan ku kejar impian
Dari balik awan ku genggam matahari

This translates as:

From behind the clouds I see the light
From behind the clouds I hear the answer
From behind the clouds I chase a dream
From behind the clouds I clutch the sun¹

Chevalier and Gheerbrant explain that “Esotericism interprets the ‘cloud’ as the ‘wall’ which separates two cosmic levels,” and that they “symbolically embrace various aspects, chiefly those relating to their confused and ill-defined nature” (p. 206). The cloud (*al’-amā*) in Islamic esotericism is the primordial, the “unknowable state of Allah before [H]is manifestation. Even in [H]is manifestation and in temporal existence, ‘cloudiness’ is a notion too commonplace to need emphasis” (pp. 206-207). They further define clouds as “...a phase in development when shapes have yet to be defined or when old shapes are vanishing and have yet to be replaced by definite shapes” (Ibid). In Japanese paintings clouds “...often depict horizontal or vertical mists (*kasumi*)” which “denote a break in the thread of a story, a transition in time-scale” (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, p. 661). Perhaps the interpretation best suited for this story is that clouds symbolize “...a metamorphosis observed, not in any one of its stages, but in its fulfillment” (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, p. 207) as Denias moves on to stages of ‘transmutation’ towards clarity. The clouds are there so Denias can see the different levels of ‘light’ until he sees the sun. Denias’ vision clears as each cloud reveals the ‘light’, ‘answer’, ‘dream’ and eventually the ‘sun’ as the ultimate purpose of his realizing his ‘self’.

Confined by custom and tradition, men and women stay in separate thatched *honal* (huts) after the first *koteka* ceremony conducted by the *suwanggi* (witchdoctor) in Arwanope, Denias’ village. Denias is young enough to sleep with his mother, who encourages him to learn. The first shot in the film is the mountain followed by the first dialogue of the mother, “The mountain will eat you, but if you study and you are smart in school, the mountain is afraid of you.”² But little Denias is easily tempted by his friends to hunt for *kus-kus* in the neighbouring forest. His “Wisdom is clouded by desire” (Mascaro, p. 39); the desires of a child who thinks only of play. Denias denies the ‘self’ when he ignores his mother’s advice. He is in the state of *Samkita*, or complete darkness, as he goes to school, but does not understand the need of knowledge. The only ‘fear’ that Denias and the children understand is the *suwanggi* who symbolizes the culture and tradition of the village.

Denias first ‘consciousness’ is his mother, who persistently encourages him to acquire knowledge. Mother is the archetypal representation of Earth. In the Qur’an, Earth is mentioned two hundred times. From the word *humus* (soil), earth is humility as mankind was fashioned from earth (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, p. 331). This relationship is affirmed in the Qur’an “He it is Who has created you from clay”

(Surah *Al-An'Am*, p. 2) and numerous other verses.³ According to the Hirschman, the more familiar symbol of earth in literature is the female role as "the Good Mother/Nurturant Goddess," as "...the civilizer" (pp. 8-11) as exemplified in care shown to Denias by his mother. Hirschman asserts that women "...were seen as linked to nature and the life forces" (p. 65). In the Chinese tradition of *Hong-Fan*, earth is at the centre, lending aid to "...all the cardinal points and seasons" (Ibid.). In Hindu tradition "the Divine Mother translates the spiritual reality of the female principle" (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, p. 677). Whilst the Good Mother is "associated with the life principle, birth, warmth, nourishment, protection, fertility, growth, abundance," the Soul Mate is "the Sophia figure" (Guerin et. al, p. 160). She is the inspiration, as Eve is to Adam, Shakti to Shiva, Sita to Rama and Prakriti to Purusha.⁴ If to be born is to "emerge from the mother's womb; to die is to return to Earth," to return to the centre (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, p. 677). Denias' mutation means a return to this 'centre'. According to Eliade, "The road leading to the centre is a "difficult road" (*dūrohana*)" (1971, p. 18). Eliade cites ancient myths and traditions whereby to seek the centre means "difficulties of the seeker for the road to the self, to the "center" of his being" (Ibid).

The little boy in Denias refuses to listen to the advice given by his mother about hanging his tee-shirt to dry by the fire. As fate would have it, Denias' mother dies in a fire due to this careless mistake of Denias. De Rantau forewarns this event by the crackling of the fire beside his sick mother who is in deep sleep after taking medication, after Denias steals out of his hut to go for a pleasurable hunt in the forest with his friends. "For the pleasures that come from the world bear in them sorrows to come" (Mascaro, 1974, p. 22).

Fire is mentioned two hundred times in the Qur'an. The mystic meaning of fire is perhaps best described in Musa's (AS) journey with his family as told in the Qur'an, "I perceive a fire; perhaps I can bring you some burning brand therefrom, or find some guidance at the fire" (*Tā-Hā*, p. 10). Abdullah Yusuf Ali translates this verse as, "He went to look for a fire for comfort and guidance. He found a higher and holier comfort and guidance" (p. 792). Fire is also God's gift (*Al-Waqi'ah*, pp. 71-73) and the light of faith as compared to the rejecters of faith is told as a parable of fire in the Qur'an:

Their similitude is that of a man who kindled a fire; When it lit all around him, God took away their light and left them in utter darkness. (*Al-Baqarah*, p. 17)

In Hindu tradition, *Agni*, *Indra* and *Surya* are "...the fires of terrestrial, intermediate and celestial worlds" respectively (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, p. 379). While it "penetrates and absorbs" the other aspect of *Agni* also destroys. As mentioned in the Bhagavad Gita, it states that "Brahman and the fire are identical" (Ibid); it is referred to as "the fire of God" which:

In the fire of an inner harmony some surrender their senses in darkness; and in the fire of the senses some surrender their outer light.

Others sacrifice their breath of life and also the powers of life in the fire of an inner union lighted by a flash of vision. (Mascaro, 1974, pp. 26-27)

Even as a burning fire sacrifices 'the breath of life' of his mother, 'the powers of life' leads Denias to a constant union which is lit by 'a flash of vision' as it leads the way to his first stage of 'transmutation' and it thus becomes "...a symbol of purification and regeneration" (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, p. 382). The death of Denias' mother delineates the boundary between boyhood and manhood for Denias; he has to lose his mother before he begins to grow out of his childhood. Fire also symbolizes death to the old civilization and resurrection of a new one. The symbol of fire is used to breach the gap of childhood to youth which leads to the 'resurrection' of Denias. According to Eliade (1960):

The longing to break the ties that hold him in bondage to the earth is not a result of cosmic pressures or of economic insecurity – it is constitutive of man, in that he is a being who enjoys a mode of existence unique in the world. (p. 106)

The process of 'resurrection' begins when Denias lies on a branch of an almost barren tree silhouetted against still waters of the lake with clouds blurring the vision of the mountain in the distance, mourning for his late mother. Denias' still figure denotes his state of *tamas* (inactivity). The spiritual dimension of Denias has been dormant until stirred by the loss of his mother. The final, physical death of his mother brings Denias to a voluntary spiritual death, but only for a while.

The tree is symbolic of the olive tree in Islam, a Blessed Tree, which "produces oil, and relish for those who use it for food" (Surah *Al-Mu'minun*, p. 20). The oil "is an ingredient in medicinal ointments and in ointments used for religious ceremonies such as the congregation of kings" (Abdullah Yusuf Ali, p. 877). The still water of the lake is another symbol related to knowledge. It is Allah's throne on the water,

“And He it is Who has created the heavens and the earth in six days and his Throne was on the water” (*Surah Hûd*, p. 7). Abdullah Yusuf Ali explains that:

It is scientifically correct to say that all life was evolved out of the waters. The throne of God's authority is metaphorically expressed over the waters i.e. as regulating all life. The past tense “was” refers to the time before life developed in solid forms, on land and in air. (p. 515)

So far, Denias' experience with the water is to dip his hands to wash his face. The water also reflects the unstable state Denias is in.

The tree is 'medicinal' in the sense of supplying Denias with the 'food' that moves him out of his state of loss and supports the level of knowing his 'self' in the realization that he needs to return to Mother, the centre. As he remembers her constant advice and final words, Denias is determined to get an education. Memory, which is a reflex of perception, plays an important role in the makeup, nature and constitution of the human being contributing towards 'profane' or external knowledge. As Guénon says:

Although [the] traditional teaching is not esoteric in the strict sense of the word, it is indeed “initiatory” and it differs profoundly in all its methods from that 'profane' education. (p. 23)

According to its tradition, the Buddha also achieved his awakening or enlightenment under a tree, the Bodhi Tree (Eckel: 37). As Denias gets down from the tree, a warm glow of evening light is seen behind the clouds. The first line of the song “From behind the clouds I see the light” is realized, but still not understood. Denias tells Maleo that he misses his mother, and Maleo tells him that his “Mother will live forever in his heart”. In the Chinese tradition of *I Ching*, fire is consistent with the colour red which also symbolizes the 'heart' and hence the passions and the spirit. The 'spirit' within him moves Denias towards taking the initial step of acquiring 'external knowledge'. The 'self' of Denias now needs to understand, to learn, to be able to see. Sight here is taken “as a symbol of knowledge” (Guénon: 14). With a sense of the present, de Rantau uses the model symbol of a Superman tee-shirt which Maleo gives to Denias to replace his burnt one. The next morning, Denias almost 'flies' like Superman to attend school, only to find his teacher has to leave the village to visit his ailing wife.

The process of understanding is painful as Denias has to face the challenges, of the 'evils' or falls. The levels of Denias' 'knowing' are visualized through his physical actions. The first is to get down from the tree, thus disentangling himself from his roots. Denias has to face other 'evils' to get to the next level. As his father feels that education has no future for him in the village, Denias is taken out of the makeshift school. When the teacher leaves, it is another 'evil' that stands in the way of Denias. As waiting the new teacher to arrive is too long, Denias is impatient is pursuing an education and decides to leave his village and heads for the mountain. This decision comes fast, especially after Maleo, his mentor, also leaves the village to take up a new posting.

De Rantau uses the visual of both Denias and Maleo at the doorway. Gateway (or doorway) is explained as:

The scene of passing from one state to another, from one world to another, from the known to the unknown, from light to darkness. (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, p. 422)

De Rantau darkens the foreground of the houses of Denias and Maleo as they leave, going towards the 'unknown' or the dark. Yet a promise is supported by the light and bright background towards which they move. The doorways also symbolize "...a passage from the realm of the profane to that of the sacred" whereby they "become symbols of the imminence and potentiality of entry into a higher reality" (Ibid).

Doorways have been used in myths and religious traditions in "...the doorways of cathedrals, Hindu *torana*, the gateways of Khmer cities and temples, Japanese *torii*," the gates of Chinese cities, the main gates of Angkor Thom which "...also give access from these four directions to the centre of the world" and the *cella* where pilgrims enter the Holy of Holies or the Real Presence of God. "In themselves they sum up the symbolism of the sanctuary, which is the gate of Heaven" (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, pp. 422-423).

Going through the forest, he faces another 'evil' and childhood fears. Between him and the *kus-kus*, is a tree that bears a flower which resembles the head-dress of the *suwanggi*. Due to the need to fill his stomach he overcomes his fear of the *suwanggi*, who symbolizes the 'culture and tradition of the village'. He takes the 'action' to kill the *kus-kus* for food and external logic is realized. Denias also has to cross a river and it poses challenges as his limited belongings fall into the river. He follows the flow of the river, rather than going against it, to regain his

things. Water symbolizes life, as stated in the Qur'an, "And We have made from water every living thing" (*Al-Anbiya'*, p. 30).

'All was water' say the Hindu scriptures, while the Taoists say: 'the wide waters had no shores'; the World Egg, Bhrahmanda, hatched upon the surface of the waters; Breath or 'Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.' (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, p. 1081)

Water cleanses and the best form of cleansing is ablution. As reported by Abu Huraira, in the course of ablution, from the washing of he face, eyes, hands, feet "...every sin they wrought will be effaced" (*Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Chapter XCVIX, p. 187). As a cosmological symbol, "Running water, the water of life...purifies, heals and rejuvenates whomever it leads to the eternal" (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, p. 1084). The Rig-Veda "praises of the waters which bring life, strength and cleansing on both the spiritual and the physical planes" (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, p. 1081). Denias has to cross the water in his search for knowledge.

Denias' travel by the river can be seen as a healing, purifying, rejuvenating, and a strengthening process. Water separates 'this' world to get to 'the other' world. De Rantau offers a shot of a bridge for Denias to cross, to get to the 'other' world. Water is also the *barakah* that helps Denias in his journey to 'return'. When Denias decides to leave his village, it is a way to break tradition that does not appeal to him. This can be described in Eliade's (1960) words, that he leaves:

... on account of his secret passions, his nostalgias, his existential contradictions and the whole universe of his imagination, which are essential to him than the readymade opinions that he utters. (p. 107)

Travel, or *hijrah*, symbolizes the paradigm shift taken by Denias. This signifies the search for wisdom and truth, as stated in the Qur'an, "Do they not travel through the land, so that their hearts (and minds) may thus learn wisdom" (*Al-Hajj*, p. 46). In order to regain the 'loss' of his mother, Denias has to travel. As he nears the mountain, a rainbow is seen in the background. In Islam the seven colours of the rainbow, which is light and water, "...are both intermediaries and pathways between Heaven and Earth. They are the bridges used by gods and heroes when they travel between this earth and the Otherworld" (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, p. 783). In China, the conjunction of the five colours attributed to the rainbow is that of *yin* and *yang* and is a sign of universal harmony and of its fecundity. While Shiva's bow is said to resemble the rainbow, Indra's is directly attributed to it. The second

line of the chorus "From behind the clouds I hear the answer" is realized as Denias reaches the mountain.

The mountain is a strong significance in Islam. Mount Sinai "...was the mountain on which the Law was given to Moses" (Abdullah Yusuf Ali, p. 1758), which is the Mount of Revelation (*At-Tûr*, p. 1). In the story of Musa's (AS) request, Allah (SWT) "manifested His Glory" as stated in the Qur'an:

He said "Oh my Lord! Show (Thyself) to me, That I may look upon Thee." God said: By no means Canst thou see Me (Direct); But look upon the mount; If it abide In its place, then Shalt thou shall see Me." When his Lord manifested His glory on the Mount, He made it as dust, And Moses fell down In a swoon." (*Al-A'raf*, p. 143)

Denias' mother uses the mountain not only to scare a little boy but to signify the barrier between Denias and his level of wisdom. Denias has now overcome this barrier and has stabilized himself. Mountains are also spoken of as pegs or stakes (Surah An-Naba': 7) which symbolizes stability. It is mentioned in the Qur'an that, "...He has affixed into the earth mountains standing firm, lest it should shake with you" (*An-Nahl*: 15). Abdullah Yusuf Ali explains this verse as:

... the earth as a spacious carpet spread beneath our feet and the eternal hills as a steadying agent to keep the carpet from rolling or shaking. (p. 660)

The formulation by Eliade is that the Sacred Mountain is the centre of the earth, as it is "where heaven and earth meet" and (p. 13). He supports this deduction from the fact that "every temple or palace...every sacred city or royal residence" are on mountains, thus making it the Sacred Mountain the *axis mundi*, "...the meeting point of heaven, earth and hell" (Ibid). Based on this formulation, when Denias finally reaches the mountain, he has come to the centre, at the 'meeting point of heaven and earth' with 'hell' yet to come.

The "hell" that he has to face comes after he crosses the mountains, where he has to face the 'evil' of the school system that needs documents to allow Denias to attend school, and the barrier posed by Noel's bullying and jealousy. This was forewarned by de Rantau when Denias has to cross fields of tall grass with hues of dark red flowers. Unlike the bright red that presents the life-principle, dark red "warns, holds back and awakens vigilance and ultimately anxiety" (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, p. 792). In a fight that injures Noel, Denias decides to return to his village

but the rain pours on him as he takes a last look at the school, not realising the blessing of rain. As stated in the Qur'an:

See you not that Allah drives the clouds gently, then joins them together, then makes them into a heap of layers, and you see the rain comes forth from between them; and He sends down from the sky hail (like) mountains, and strikes therewith whom He wills. The vivid flash of its (clouds) lightning nearly blinds the sight. (*An-Nur*, p. 43)

A school teacher, Sam Koalbas suffers as much as Denias in helping the boy realize his dream (*impian*), as sung in the third line of the chorus. She eventually succeeds and the clouds that symbolize the unclear vision of Denias' potential and his destiny, begins to clear with rays of light that emit through these clouds.

Light (*nūr*) symbolizes knowledge in Islam. As stated in the Qur'an, "Light upon Light! Allah guides to His Light whom He wills" (*An-Nur*, p. 35). Light is also known as *jyotis* in Sanskrit, which:

... symbolizes knowledge and it is the source of all other light, which is but its reflection, not relative knowledge being able to exist save by participation, however indirect or remote, in the essence of Supreme Knowledge. (Guénon:, pp. 44-45)

De Rantau also uses the symbol of the moon, which gets its light from the reflection of the sun, when Denias has learned something new. For example, after Maleo makes him re-position cardboard cut-outs to learn geography, the moon hints Denias' understanding when he explains the map to the inhabitants of his father's *honal*.

To realize 'good' Denias has to face 'evils', which are external factors and are these are changeable. The 'evils' all work as catalysts towards the realization of 'goodness'. The 'good' that comes out of these 'evils' is the possibility of acquiring of understanding, as sung in the closing song, "Life is wonderful when you know which is the true path; when you believe"⁵ (*Hidup ini indah bila kau tahu jalan mana yang benar; bila kau percaya*). In knowing which path to take, Denias begins to realize his potential, as he believes in his 'self'. Truth is possible, not just speculative for Denias. Knowing for him is undergoing the experiences, tasting the bitterness of the 'evils' before he can understand. The pain that Denias undergoes is necessary for him to understand his 'self', his own desire to learn. To know the importance of seeking knowledge, Denias has first to believe. With belief, Denias will return to his centre when Denias goes to the open field and thanks

God when he is finally accepted by the school. The “dramatic intensity” of Denias’ end to his voyage is “the fact the weight is abolished” when “an ontological mutation has occurred in the human being himself” (Eliade, 1960, p. 104).

As a *dalang*, John de Rantau has played god by repeating the “divine act” by manifesting the medium of film as a force, transforming “chaos into cosmos” (Eliade, 1971, p. 11). As a director he has aesthetically visualized the limitation of man’s wisdom by not wanting to progress beyond the reality that surrounds him, which includes the security of his age-old customs and tradition. He sees the ‘falls’ or ‘evils’ as necessary help man to look beyond the physical reality, to ‘travel’ towards the metaphysical. In *Denias: Senandung di Atas Awan* John de De Rantau portrays the predicament of the fallen man who must suffer pain to rise and return to the final reintegration into his Divine Source.

Notes

- ¹ Translated by researcher.
- ² Translated by researcher.
- ³ Further examples – Surahs *Al-Hijr*: 26, 28, 33; *Ta-Ha*: 55.
- ⁴ Baharuddin Ahmad – lectures ISTAC.
- ⁵ Researcher’s translation.

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ROHANI MD. YOUSOFF is PhD candidate at ISTAC, International Islamic University Malaysia. She teaches Philosophy of the Arts at the National Arts Culture and Heritage Academy (ASWARA), Kuala Lumpur. She is also a theatre practitioner.