BOOK REVIEW


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*Symbols in the Plays of Noordin Hassan* (2017) is the book publication of Rohani Md. Yousoff’s doctorate dissertation that was completed in 2010 by the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation (ISTAC), International Islamic University Malaysia.

This 353-pages book comprises five chapters that respectively detail Noordin Hassan’s background, a brief introduction of symbols and their significance in writings, the prevalence and context of symbols found in the selected plays of Noordin Hassan, the recognition of perennial philosophy in his selected plays and, lastly, concluding remarks by the author herself. One noteworthy appreciation is of Rohani’s translation of Noordin’s five selected plays that span 29 years: *Jangan Bunuh Rama-rama* (1979), *Cindai* (1989), *Sirih Bertepuk Pinang Menari* (1992), *Mana Setangginya?* (2000) and *Intan Yang Tercanai* (2008), found in the first appendix. This is followed by an appendix of a chronology of Noordin’s works.

Noordin Hassan is best-known as Malaysia’s seventh National Literary Laureate. His early exposure to Malay performing arts and literature, devout practice of Islam as well as Western education in literature and art has enabled him to revive and redefine Malay drama unlike any other Malay playwright before or since. In the 1950s, when Malay and Malaysian drama were dominated by Western imitations and colonial importations, Noordin’s biggest contribution has been the integration of Islam in Malay drama and theatre, especially by pioneering the genre of *teater fitrah* or, in simple terms, theatre that probes into the primordial human nature. While themes
on the environment and other persistent socio-political issues were prevalent, Noordin’s main concern was theatre supports the process of “returning” the human “self” to God and the attainment of “truth”.

Rohani’s objective is to initiate an academic study of the intricacies of Noordin’s works with the intent to revive research into Malay Islamic literature from a non-Western perspective that is more appropriate. This is further supported by Noordin himself who, as an Islamic and traditional Malay thinker and traditional Malay drama proponent, agrees with a cultural and religious relativism approach to drama. The artificial treatment of previous critics, researchers and other writers in identifying the Malay and Islamic constructs that are crucial to the comprehensive understanding of Noordin’s plays prompts Rohani to conduct an in-depth interpretation of symbols in the plays along a traditional framework of textual analysis as well as Perennial philosophy viewpoint.

The book begins with a succinct foreword by Rohani’s doctorate supervisor, Associate Professor Dato’ Dr. Baharudin Ahmad, in which he provides a glimpse of Noordin’s connection with Penang, performing arts and Islam. Rohani further continues this discussion in the introduction, beginning with her first encounter with Noordin himself. This introductory chapter situates the significance of Noordin and his works in Malay and Malaysian literature by identifying the Malay and Islamic constructs that inspired his dramatic writings and the critical reception of his works in Malaysia.

In the first chapter, “Noordin Hassan: His Life, Works and Inspiration”, readers are presented with the concise factors that contributed to Noordin’s works. These include his own mixed-race heritage, his early life in the multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious state of Penang under the British administration and, later, Japanese occupation, exposure to bangsawan and boria performances, inclination towards sufism as well as his religious and spiritual education against a British education, his further higher education in England and travels across Europe, as well as his eventual return to Malaysia and achievements in redefining Malay drama and theatre.

The second chapter, “The Significance of Symbols” expounds on the definition, nature, function and significance of symbols in language, culture and spiritual traditions as a form of expression. It is here that perennial philosophy and its notable figures are mentioned. While the universality of symbols is discussed, particular focus is given to symbols used in the Qur’an and hadith as manifestations of the human self and as a sign of the divine being. Interestingly, Rohani notes that while Noordin uses Islamic symbols
without change, he also creates new symbols to represent the decline of spirituality and moral values in modern times.

The core chapter of this book is the third chapter, “Symbols in Noordin’s Plays”. Here, Rohani dissects each of the five selected plays, beginning with their respective background and both Noordin and Rohani’s involvement in their staging. This is followed by a meticulous analysis of the symbols used within the plays and how they refer to their Islamic sources. Extensive evidence and references are given from the Qur’an as well as experts on Islamic topics critical to the analysis. Rohani’s arguments are also well substantiated by her involvement in Noordin’s stage productions and ability to identify the influences in Noordin’s life and inspirations that directly resulted in his use of particular symbols.

In the fourth chapter, entitled “Arrival at Perennial Philosophy”, Rohani summarizes how acquired knowledge, childhood experiences and revealed knowledge shaped Noordin’s perennial philosophy. She singles out Noordin’s natural inclination towards sufism and ability to transform his life experiences into a profound appreciation of the underlying and unifying elements of all faiths and their mystical branches. All of these are reflected in his selected plays, proving that the capacity of the symbols used in the plays resonate a universal meaning as well as the human journey to return to Allah in the Islamic tradition. In the concluding chapter, it then becomes clear how all the above factors culminated in the conception of teater fitrah, and that the playwright has the ability to imbue theatre with Islamic teachings as an affirmation of faith.

Rohani’s effort and contribution towards this work is much appreciated. As someone who had a close professional working relationship with Noordin throughout her journey as an actor, director and researcher, her capacity to understand and decipher symbols according to Noordin’s worldview is crucial. Perennial philosophy is a challenging study to grasp for even scholars, let alone the average reader, and is almost unheard of in the entirety of Malaysian literature. This is the first attempt to study Noordin’s plays in light of perennial philosophy, a challenge that Rohani succeeds. This book ought to be considered as a personal and professional achievement for both Rohani and Noordin.

Although the book carries an academic tone, Rohani is articulate in her language, coherent in her arguments, smooth in her organization structure of chapters and topics as well as transition of ideas. Her ability to clarify difficult concepts is particularly commendable. The inclusion of detailed
footnotes and references to other supplementary materials is especially useful to readers. In spite of the deeply complex analysis, Noordin’s plays are still a leisurely read for those who are not exposed to Malay writings and Islamic mysticism.

In spite of Rohani’s observation of the lack of support of local drama, this publication by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka is also a positive step towards greater exposure and a critical understanding of Malay literary works and their translations. Suggestion for future reprints would be the insertion of page numbers of play excerpts found in the appendix within the chapters as well as a more revised index.

This book is a recommended read for all level readers of Noordin Hassan. However, it is recommended that those who are not familiar with Noordin’s works to read the five plays in the first appendix before proceeding to the first chapter and beyond.