

# LIGHT, SOUND AND FRAGRANCE: THE IMPACT OF SUFISM ON THE AESTHETICS OF TRADITIONAL MALAY LITERATURE<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Sufi ideas exerted a great influence on nearly every aspect of traditional Malay literature of the late 16th to the 17th century. Not only Malay literary practice of that age owed much to the Sufi inspiration, equally important is the fact that Sufism brought to life a pre-modern Malay literary theory including, inter alia, fundamental concepts of literary aesthetics. On the basis of a poem by Hamzah Fansuri and Sufi allegories *Hikayat Inderaputera* and *Hikayat Si Burung Pingai* the article investigates the Sufi doctrine of imagination as a particular world all of its own, the “aesthetics of light” expressed through specific illumination of portrayed events and “lighting effects”, and the “aesthetics of ecstasy” communicated through acoustic and olfactory images. By embodying these aesthetics in the “flesh and blood” of literary works, their creators not only managed to reveal Sufi doctrines with more clarity and beauty, but also let their audience experience them both intellectually and emotionally.

**Keyword:** Sufism, Hamzah Fansuri, literary aesthetic, Hikayat Metaphysics.

## Introduction

It is difficult to overestimate the impact of the Sufi world-outlook on traditional Malay culture and literature in general, and Malay literature of the 17th century, which is often aptly called “the age of Sufis” in particular. At that time, Sufism brought forth both the genre of systematic treatises in Malay (*kitab*), which substantially influenced the intellectual life of the Malay society, and the genre of belletristic Sufi allegories, which, *inter alia*, greatly contributed to Malay ideas of the beautiful. Along with it, Sufism Islamised, influenced and transformed all major genres of written Malay literature from love-and-adventure romances in prose (*hikayat*) and verse (*syair*) to edifying “mirrors for kings” (*hidayat*) and historical writings (*sejarah*, *salasilah*). Together with new ideas of God, man, world and their inter-relations, these genres brought into Malay literature fundamental concepts of Islamic poetics and literary aesthetics in their Sufi form. This, in its turn, led to the emergence of the system of Malay literature and the Malay literary self-awareness, a kind of pre-modern literary theory, which explained tasks and methods of the creation of literary works, the hierarchy of their genres and the methods of their impact on the reader or listener.<sup>2</sup>

The contribution of Sufism to the formation of Malay literary aesthetics was one of the most impressive aspects of its enrichment of Malay literature as a whole. A brief survey of major Sufi conceptions widely spread in the Malay world in the late 16th to the 17th century centuries will help us to understand why this contribution was so great.

Sufism, the Islamic mysticism, sees its final goal in the achievement of the nearness to and union with God. Metaphysics of Sufism is based on the idea of the circle of being consisting of the arc of descent (*tanazul*) and the arc of ascent (*taraki*). The arc of descent is the divine creation of the universe or the macrocosm. What sets this dynamic process in motion is Divine Love that first revealed Itself in the creation of the Light (*Nur*) or Reality (*Hakikat*) of Muhammad, from which the entire Universe comes into being as a series of manifestations (*tajaliat*) of the Divine Essence (*Zat*). These manifestations bring into existence a hierarchy of worlds, first spiritual and then material: the world of spirits (*alam arwah*), the world of imagination (*alam misal*), and the world of bodies

(*alam ajsam*). Just as a seed contains an entire tree, the Essence embraces the entire plenitude of Being. In the transcendent aspect, the boundless ocean of the Divine Essence is not one with its manifestations, similar to the waves on its surface. At the same time, in its immanent aspect, the Essence is inseparable from manifestations as the ocean is inseparable from the waves, and, therefore, It is omnipresent.

The series of manifestations, through which the things dormant as fixed essences (*ayan sabitah*) or general ideas in the Divine Consciousness acquires actual existence, reaches its culmination in the creation of man. Man unites in his “self” all the manifestations, both spiritual and material, and thus represents an exact replica of the Universe, a microcosm. That is why, in order to know God, man should not “look around” – suffice it to turn to the self-cognition.

Here the arc of ascent begins. Metaphysically speaking, this arc implies the traversing by the Sufi of the entire Path of Creation in reverse order, rejecting one by one all the veils, that is manifested worlds which conceal his true “self” and separate it from God. Like in the case of the Creation, the incentive of the Sufi’s treading the hard and thorny Path of Return to God is the Divine Love. The major instruments of man on this Path are ascetic practices and the Sufi meditation (*zikir*), based on the constant repetition of God’s Names. In the ethical aspect, self-cognition is the purification of the true “self” or the spiritual heart from all attachments and passions. This purification being completed, the Sufi, who has lost the sense of his individual “self” (*fana*), sees the shining Face of the Lord within the depths of his heart and attains mystical Union with Him. Thus, a wave returns to the bosom of the ocean, or, using other Sufi symbols, a tree returns to the seed, a golden coin to the gold, and a bird to its nest.<sup>3</sup>

Even this limited survey shows how literary and aesthetically friendly Sufism is. Both its symbolic mode of representation of God’s Reality and human’s realities and its metaphysical doctrines are most conducive to the expression and perception in terms of aesthetics.<sup>4</sup> Particularly high is the aesthetic potential of such Sufi concepts as:

- (1) the essential integrity of the Universe and its multi-layered character;

- (2) the Sufi Path, with its many obstacles, sorrows and joys, which crosses the hierarchy of dazzling worlds;
- (3) Divine Love as simultaneously the cause of Creation and the principal means of the Sufi's ascent to the Creator represented as the Supreme Beloved.

It is not accidental that a *hadith* much favoured by Sufis says: "God is beautiful and loves beauty" (Schimmel, 1975:291). In addition, the emphasis on the essential unity of the Universe also means that aesthetically oriented, narrative allegories could easily absorb various symbolic images and motifs deriving from various traditions (indigenous Malay, Hindu-Javanese, Arabico-Persian), thus enhancing their expressivity.<sup>5</sup>

In this article, I am going to address only a few issues related to Sufi aesthetics in Malay *hikayat*-allegories, namely the key concept of the world of imagination as the source of aesthetic creation and the Sufi aesthetics of light and ecstasy as they are presented in texts of this genre. For the discussion of these issues, I shall use three texts of the end of the 16th the first half of the 17th century: A poem by Hamzah Fansuri, *Hikayat Inderaputera* and *Hikayat Si Burung Pingai*. The first two works originate from Aceh, and the last originating from Minangkabau or the borderland between Minangkabau and Aceh.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Concept of the World of Imagination and the Creative Process**

In order to better understand the concepts of Malay literary aesthetics brought to life by Sufi doctrines, we should begin with the exposition of where and how the literary work was considered to be produced. In other words, we should turn to the concept of the world of imagination with which Sufism enriched Malay culture and which became one of the foundations of the Malay teaching of the creative process. According to both Sufi texts and introductions to a number of literary works, the general content or meaning of the piece of literature constitutes the sum total of images of individual things, which are visible by the inner sight. These images abide – or rather shine – in the world of imagination (*alam misal, alam hayal*).

This world occupies an intermediary position between the world of bodies and the world of spirits and exists in both the macrocosm, that is the Universe, and the microcosm, that is the soul of a human being.

H. Corbin defines this world as:

[...] the world of autonomous forms and images [...] not inherent in a material substratum [...] but “in suspense” in the place of their appearance, in the imagination, like an image suspended in a mirror. It is a perfectly real world, preserving all the richness and diversity of the sensible world but in a spiritual state (Corbin, 1966:407).

We find similar definitions of the world of imagination in Sufi works of the 17th century, which originate from the Malay Archipelago (Johns, 1965:64–67; Doorenbos, 1933:85–86).

The processes that take place in the world of imagination are described in both Malay Sufi works and pieces of Malay literature that are not related to Sufism directly. For instance, in the introduction of his poem, the anonymous author of *Syair Ikan Tambra* (Poem of the Carp, 19c.) described, how he meditated on the creative Greatness of Allah for many days and nights, desiring to write this poem. Once the author continued,

I was praying, standing on a mat,  
Suddenly I came to in the middle of the night  
[And saw] the fish in deep water [with my inner sight],  
Which was similar to an emerald in appearance (Spat,  
1903:277).<sup>7</sup>

One of his brothers-in-penmanship also told us how after a similarly long meditation, he

[...] woke up suddenly one night,  
Having seen the descent of spiritual light (*cahaya nurani*). [...] First of all he described the country and its raja [that appeared to his inner sight] (Van Ronkel, 1921:70–71).<sup>8</sup>

Thus, when intending to create his work, the Malay man of letters concentrated in his prayer on the thought of the creative energy of Allah. Greatly enhanced by the quietness of the night and his solitude, this concentration led him to a deep meditation,

similar to that of the Sufi zikir (Arab. *dhikr*): the author emptied his mind of external reality and, if God showed him Mercy, his soul was suddenly lit up. The descending ray of spiritual light filled his soul and illuminated images that previously lay dormant in the imagination, waiting to become visible. Once seen by the “eye of the heart” of the man of letters, in accordance with literary conventions, the images were transformed in the words of the literary work to be created.<sup>9</sup>

These literary conventions, in turn, were also determined by aesthetic principles, in particular by the Sufi aesthetics of light, to which I am going to turn in the next section of the article.

### The Aesthetics of Light

The role played by the symbolism of light in Sufism, including its Malay forms, was enormous. It is little wonder, therefore, that the aesthetics of light, illumination and what can be called “lighting effects” played an equally significant role in Malay literature of scholastic and poetical Sufism, particularly in the latter. In a certain aspect, the whole Sufi doctrine of the descent (the Creation) and the ascent (the return of the Sufi to God) could be presented in terms of the light symbolism.

According to a famous poem by Hamzah Fansuri<sup>10</sup> (and works by many other Sufi authors as well), the first creation that shone out of the impervious darkness of the Sea of God’s Essence was the Light of Muhammad – *Nur Muhammad*, which is the Prophet’s pre-eternal, luminous Reality. The Light of Muhammad is the first creation. The Universe and Man are created, in turn, from this Light and, therefore all the worlds that make up the Universe have It as their foundation, background and the permeating principle.

The Light of Muhammad is both the first Divine Lover and the first Divine Beloved, but at the same time, with Its creation, has become obvious. This causes the longing of man for God and the insatiable desire of man to return to their original Unity, which brings to existence the Path of Return, or the Sufi Path, also lit up with the Light and traversing all the worlds. The higher is a given world hierarchically, the more intensive is the light that illuminates it.

Such is – in a brief and cursory exposition – the metaphysics of the Light in Malay Sufism, which underpins the Malay Sufi aesthetics

of the light. One of the best poetical examples that reveals major features of these aesthetics, is that same Hamzah's Poem XV, which has already been mentioned (Drewes and Brakel, 1986:86–89).

A greater part of the poem is literally flooded with dazzling light. Woven from “rays” of such words as radiance (*nurani*), shining (*terang*), light (*cahaya*), flow of light (*pancar*), brightly burning (*nyarak*), this light fills the verse space and falls on the shining surface of the mirror, which is also described as the light and reflects the light. In this luminous space, there appear one by one many pairs of Hamzah's favourite symbolic images. Images in each pair, although contrasting outwardly, are identical inwardly: mother and child, cotton and fabric, arrack and vessel of coconut palm leaves that contains arrack, cupbearer and inebriate, Mansur (the great Sufi master Mansur Hallaj) and Nasir, blade and sheath, Allah and idol, rough earth and polished mirror, an enamoured and the Beloved.

Only the journey across the Sea of Unity, guided by the Divine Love, is able to overcome the duality of the images as well as the duality of the Sufi and God. However, the “seafarer” should not “strain his eyes peering at the distance” as his Divine Beloved is close. In fact, She resides inside his “self”, that same theatre of God's manifestations (*mazhar*) lit up with the dazzling light, which appeared before our eyes in the beginning of the poem.

Although relatively brief, this poem with its shining background against which diverse symbolic images appear and the difficult path to be traversed by the Sufi in order to overcome the duality and achieve Union with the Divine Beloved – is a kind of paradigm for narrative Sufi allegories. Using *Hikayat Inderaputera* (Mulyadi and Braginsky, 2007:1–245) as an example, we shall turn now to the discussion of how the Sufi metaphysics of the Light is expressed in such allegories through the literary aesthetics of the light.

A remarkable feature of *Hikayat Inderaputera* is that, as its author sees images in the world of imagination (or, rather, as he is prompted to see them there by aesthetic conventions), he shows these images, against the shining background. The radiance of the background is not portrayed directly. It appears as if by itself, due to a myriad of descriptions of a specific kind, which occupies

a considerable part of the hikayat's narrational space, thus making up this background.

To say it differently, *Hikayat Inderaputera* unfolds before our eyes a long sequence of portrayals of nature and gardens, palaces and fortresses, battles and picturesque parades of fleets and armies, weddings and birth ceremonies. Each of these descriptions, in turn, consists of minute lists of things such as fabrics, clothes and toilet sets with precious bowls and jugs; all kinds of vessels and ornaments, weapons, umbrellas, flags and royal regalia, wedding palanquins and bathing pavilions.

What is however particularly important is that all that the author of the hikayat describes is made of or embellished with precious metals (primarily gold, but also silver and *suasa*, an alloy of gold and copper) and iridescent jewels (pearls, diamonds, rubies, emeralds or "gems of nine kinds"). This refers not only to man-made, but also to natural objects. The seashore is covered with golden powder; its pebbles are of pearls and rocks of jewels; in his wanderings the hero comes across mountains of silver, *suasa*, gold and emeralds. According to Proudfoot's Malay Concordance Project,<sup>11</sup> gold and other precious metals are mentioned in *Hikayat Inderaputera* no less than 419 times, jewels 242 times and the formula "a golden object inlaid with jewels" 68 times. All these substances shine brightly, and it is precisely their shining that forms the radiant background of the *hikayat*.

But there is more to it than this. If we bring these descriptions "closer to the eyes", so to speak, we observe how the outlines of the objects begin to dissolve: a radiant golden palace, for example, can easily be confused with the golden fence surrounding it; a fence, with a garden which is crowded by golden and silver trees with emerald leaves, ponds set with jewels and vases of gold and *suasa*; gardens, with magic ships not unlike Inderaputera's unique boat of green glass, which is in effect a swimming garden, full of golden objects embellished with jewels. In the end, all the objects disappear and only the gleaming background that mentioned earlier remains.

However, what is the function of gold and jewels in Sufi *hikayat*-allegories? I believe that, like the golden background and the outlining of objects with golden paint in Christian icons (Florensky, 1993:136-40) or the golden background and the use of gold and *lapis*



*lazuli* in Persian miniature (Nasr, 1990:181, Shukurov, 1989:166), in *hikayat*-allegories too, gold in the descriptions of objects and of their background pointed to the shift of the action to the spiritual world.

It is not accidental that in *Hikayat Inderaputera*, the protagonist finds himself on the seashore of golden dust and pebbles of jewels as soon as he crosses the border of earthly realms (Mulyadi and Braginsky, 2007:31). These realms symbolically correspond to the world of bodies and the stage of *syariat* (the law) of the Sufi Path,<sup>12</sup> whereas the realm of *peri* and *jinn* (fairies and genies) that he enters corresponds to the world of imagination and the stage of *tarikah* (the way).

Numberless golden objects, jewels and threads of pearls that fill seven paradises in *Hikayat Si Burung Pingai* are another confirmation of the same shift of action to spiritual spheres (Braginsky, 1993:307-09). Moreover, the paradises, in their Sufi interpretation, belong to the world of imagination, and represent a kind of “entrance halls” to the higher Sufi stage of the truth (*hakikat*).

Finally, in the prose treatises by Hamzah Fansuri and some other Malay Sufi authors, gold as such and the radiance of precious stones symbolise the internal, spiritual essence of things, whereas golden coins and stones themselves symbolise the external form of things as entities of the world of bodies (al-Attas, 1970:313–14, 433–34; Johns, 1957:71).

However that may be, after being used in a great number of episodes, the gleaming golden background gradually loses its expressivity and consequently the sharpness of its perception. As an outcome, its radiance turns into a kind of mild luminescence, something similar to a soft, steady glow, which merely signifies that the action takes place in spiritual worlds. A different function in the illumination of episodes is performed by lighting effects, another expressive means of the aesthetics of the light. The lighting effects suddenly flashes against this softly glowing background as something much more intensive, bright, dynamic and iridescent. They resemble an instantaneous, blinding flash of lightning and may indicate either a sudden, unexpected contact of the protagonist, who personifies the Sufi-wayfarer, with the reality of the highest spiritual world. In fact, these flashes symbolise self-revelations of the absolutely inscrutable Divine Essence, of which even the inner

sight can at best catch a glimpse fleeting like lightning (Chittick, 1994:81–82).<sup>13</sup>

Although lighting effects of this kind occasionally occur in earlier episodes of *Hikayat Inderaputera*, more often and especially impressively they are portrayed in the closing part of the *hikayat*, when the Sufi path of the hero is coming to an end. And this is undoubtedly not accidental again.

Here are only two examples of such lighting effects. The first of them flashes in the episode of Inderaputera's encounter with a saintly hermit Berma Sakti who gives him a magical mango fruit and accepts him as his disciple (Mulyadi and Braginsky, 2007:174–81). From the point of view of the plot, this is the end of Inderaputera's wanderings. At the same time, from the allegorical, Sufi viewpoint this is the achievement of the last stage of the Path, the stage of *ma'rifat*, and the meeting with the Universal Spirit (*Ruh al-Kull*), or the Light of Muhammad. This is how this meeting is described.

Meanwhile thunder rumbled, followed by lightnings and thunderbolts, and dazzling light shone over the plain. [...] In a moment the light flashed and produced a white cloud [...], which turned into rain of rosewater. The light flashed again, and a red cloud appeared. But the wind blew and the red cloud burst to pieces, turning into rain of musk. The light flashed again and produced a green cloud, which burst out, turning into rain of spikenard. Then the light began to grow, rumbling deafeningly, like thunder. It became huge and covered the entire plain with its radiance. But in a moment, Inderaputera saw the light disappear to turn into an unspeakably beautiful garden (Mulyadi and Braginsky, 2007:174–75).<sup>14</sup>

It is precisely in this garden that Inderaputera encounters the hermit Berma Sakti.

And finally, one more lighting effect from *Hikayat Inderaputera*, which is used in the scene of the coming of a princess to have a look at Inderaputera's astonishing boat, similar to a floating park (Mulyadi and Braginsky 2007: 200–10). In terms of the Sufi allegory, the park, where Inderaputera and the princess meet, symbolises the highest of the four heavenly Gardens, the Garden of Divine Essence (Bakhtiar, 1976:30),<sup>15</sup> while the princess personifies this Essence Itself, the Divine Beloved (Braginsky, 2007:cxvi–cxvii).

On the deck of Inderaputera's boat park, the princess sits on the shining golden throne with a revolving seat surrounded by an octagonal screen of multi-coloured glass. Her ladies of the court settle themselves around the throne. Then different colours begin to flash one after another:

When the princess turned to (the side of the screen made of) red glass, her whole appearance, jewellery and garments became red. Then she turned to the white glass, and all her body and finery became white. When the princess turned to the yellow glass to talk to the wives of princes, she became yellow from head to foot. When she turned to the violet glass to talk to the wives of ministers, her body and finery looked completely violet (Mulyadi and Braginsky, 2007:200–01).<sup>16</sup>

As she goes on turning on the revolving seat, her radiant countenance, jewellery and garments of brocade continue to glint, now with brightly green, blue, purple and orange colours. These changes of the colour symbolise different manifestations of the Divine Essence, depending on the Divine Attribute through which It shines (Braginsky, 2007:cxvii). This is how, through such devices of the aesthetics of light as mildly glowing background and lightning effects flashing against it, the Sufi doctrine of the Path of Return through different ontological worlds finds its expression in *Hikayat Inderaputera*.

### **Aesthetics of Ecstasy**

Closely related to the aesthetics of light is what can be called the aesthetics of ecstasy. The Sufi concepts of *hal* and *fana*<sup>17</sup> are the foundation of these aesthetics. The *hal* is a momentary vision of realities of the spiritual world granted to the Sufi-wayfarer by God's Mercy, in order to encourage him to selflessly tread the Path. The *fana* is the state that the Sufi reaches at the final stage of the Path, when he achieves his goal. At this stage he rejects everything which is not God (*ghair Allah*), not only the world and his "self", both low and high, but even the mystical knowledge-*ma'rifat* itself. Only God's Face shines at that moment in the absolute vacuity of the Sufi's purified heart, and, having completely lost his sense of "self", the Sufi experiences his oneness with God, the mystical

Union. Both, *hal* and *fana*, are ecstatic experiences. Therefore, the aesthetics of ecstasy determines artistic principles that are intended to symbolically express the ecstatic state of the character and to awake a similar state in the soul of the readers.

Sometimes the ecstatic effect is expressed by or awoken through its portrayal in a number of aspects – visual, audible and olfactory – which are intended to influence several senses simultaneously. An example of this kind of expression we can find in *Hikayat Inderaputera* (Mulyadi and Braginsky, 2007:49–50). However, more powerful are manifestations of the aesthetics of ecstasy in *Hikayat Si Burung Pingai*, the Sufi allegory telling of the mystical bird which flew away from its master, Sidang Budiman, and Sidang Budiman’s long search for the bird, during which he visited seven paradises and finally found his bird under God’s Throne. Particularly interesting and beautiful is the final episode of the *hikayat*, narrating the swinging of the four wives of the Prophet Muhammad and his daughter Fatimah in the swing that brought them to the ecstatic state and the achievement of *fana* (Braginsky, 1993: 311–14; *Hikayat Si Burung*, 9–11<sup>18</sup>).

This episode takes place in the dome of glass symbolising the spiritual heart. In this dome there is a lake into which a river, called the River of Eternity, flows. The pond symbolises the four stages of the Sufi Path. The perimeter of its banks is called *syariat*, its water is *tarikah*, its rocks are *hakikat* and the sand on its bottom is *ma’rifat*. Near the pond there grows the mystical tree *Syajarah al-Yakin*. Its leaves of *dewangga keemasan*, that is tapestry with a golden pattern, are garments of the Prophet’s wives and Fatimah. After changing their clothes and putting on these garments, they bathed in the pond and swinging on a swing. Having swung, they went to the plain of *Alam Lahut*, that is to the World of Divinity, the highest of spiritual worlds. On reaching it, the Sufi experiences mystical Union with God. On the plain they pick flowers to make a *malai*, a floral head decoration worn by the bridegroom at his wedding, which they intend to give to the Prophet. At that moment all the flowers on the tree bloom, spreading around fragrant aromas, and the instant of mystical Union comes, when “feelings merge into feelings, thoughts into thoughts and mystery into mystery” (Braginsky, 1993:314).<sup>19</sup> This episode, with the swinging as its centrepiece, is, therefore,

the symbolic description of the entire Sufi path crowned with the mystical Union, *fana*.

Like in the works based on the aesthetics of light, in this *hikayat*, too, the shining background produced by the radiance of gold and jewels indicates that the action of this episode unfolds in the spiritual world. The pond's banks are strewn with golden dust; leaves of the mystical tree are garments of tapestry with golden patterns, embroidered with all kinds of jewels; the Prophet's wives donned in these garments swing on the golden board which hangs on the string woven of golden threads and so on. This radiance cannot fail to add to the atmosphere of ecstasy that holds sway in the episode, but it is not visual effects that play the major role in the creation of this atmosphere. The acoustic and olfactory images are by far more important for this.

Albeit the description of the swinging in the swing is by itself a powerful means to achieve the state of ecstasy, it is considerably enhanced by the repetition of acoustic images, reaching their peak in the passages about the swinging itself and the mystical tree in bloom. In both cases, the acoustic images as if imitating a rhythmical drum-roll of the *rebana*, a small Malay drum, used in the *Sufi zikir* precisely for the purpose of bringing the participants to ecstasy. Here are two excerpts from these passages. To show the imitation of *rebana* sounds, I shall quote the first of them in the Malay original:

*Ummi Fatimah berdondang didondang dia, Ummi Salamah berdondang-dondang dia, Ummi Hatijah didondang-dondang, berdondang-dondang, berbulang-baling (dia). Ummi Fatimah berdondang-dondang, didondang, berdondang. Ummi Salamah (di)dondang-dondang, berdondang. (Ummi) Hatijah berdondang-dondang, didondang (pada) bintang timur, berdondang-dondang pada pintu sungai. Ummi berdondang didondang angin, telah ummi berdondang-dondang (pada) awan berarak-arak, ummi berdondang-dondang (pada) mega bergantung. Ummi Salamah berdondang-dondang, Ummi (Mai)mun(ah) berdondang, Ummi Hatijah berdondang-dondang (Hikayat Si Burung Pingai, 10).<sup>20</sup>*

The second excerpt describes fragrant flowers blossoming in the mystical tree:

Seven flowers blossomed in it (in the tree; V.B.), the tree flowered seven times a day, its flowers were (most) fragrant, their sweet

## MALAY LITERATURE

smell filled the whole world. (The tree) blossomed (seven times a day and this number) never decreased: (it) flowered full of beauty, (it) flowered full of fragrance, (it) flowered as befits one, (it) flowered full of radiance, (it) flowered full of purity as well as praise (of God). And so, (its) flowers measured (the expanse of) the heavens, (its) flowers filled the earth from east to west (...), (the tree) flowered full of dignity, (it) flowered full of joy, (it) flowered full of mystery, (it) flowered full of praise (of God) (*Hikayat Si Burung Pingai*).<sup>21</sup>

In the complete description of the swinging, the root *dondang* – “to swing, a swing” is repeated 64 times. In the narrative of the blossoming tree, the root *kembang* – “to bloom, to flower, a flower” is repeated 12 times.

In the episode of the swinging, olfactory images play as important a role as acoustic ones. The episode is literally flooded with the aroma of both flowers and fragrances, in particular, incense. Everything emits this aroma that not only heralds mystical Union in Sufi symbolism, but also is used in Malay shamanic rites to cause the ecstatic effect (see Gramberg, 1877). The pond is filled with fragrant water from the Meccan Well of Zamzam, the soil on its banks is ambergris. The sweet scent of flowers of the mystical tree fills the entire Universe from east to west, from this world to the world beyond. The sap that flows from the mystical tree is a concoction of rosewater, musk, spikenard and resin of the incense-tree, which spreads around “indescribable fragrance”. The sapwood of the mystical tree is wood of the incense-tree, its hard core is sandalwood, and its roots are eagle-wood. All these are well known kinds of aromatic wood. Finally, the five women from the Prophet’s family mix musk and incense and, having anointed themselves with this concoction, they come to the plain of *Alam Lahut*, the soil of which is musk.

Thus, to achieve the effect required by the aesthetics of ecstasy, the joint powers of the swinging, drum-beating, and intoxication with fragrances were used in this episode of *Hikayat Si Burung Pingai*.

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In this article I only touched upon the Sufi aesthetics of light and ecstasy, leaving aside for the time being the aesthetics of symbolic

allusions and the aesthetics of symmetry, numbers and numerical compositions. However, even this rather incomplete exposition shows, how much Malay literary aesthetics owes to Sufism and the aesthetic views brought about by its doctrines. However, the genuine extent of the influence of the Sufi aesthetics on Malay literature will become obvious only after a detailed analysis of the transformation that the Sufi aesthetics underwent in Malay non-Sufi works. This is, however, a totally different topic.

## Notes

- 1 In the article, both Malay and Arabic words are presented in their Malay spelling; all the translations of passages in Malay are by the present author.
- 2 For a detailed examination of the role of Sufi stimuli in the development of traditional Malay letters, see Braginsky 2004:211–22, 267–80, 359–63, 669–727.
- 3 The bibliography of Malay Sufism, its mystical metaphysics and symbolism is extensive. With the purposes of this article in mind, I would first and foremost refer to such works as al-Attas 1970, Johns 1957, Bukhari Lubis 1993, Abdul Hadi 2001.
- 4 For a closer relation between the Sufi metaphysics and aesthetics, see, for instance, Ardalan and Bakhtiar, 1973, Nasr, 1990.
- 5 For the synthesis of these components originating from various literary traditions, see Braginsky 2004:260–64, 319–39
- 6 For a more detailed study of this poem by Hamzah Fansuri and the edition and analysis of *Hikayat Si Burung Pingai*, see Braginsky 2010: 385–87; Braginsky 1993: 137–40, 304–15, 356–62. For *Hikayat Inderaputera* as a Sufi allegory, see Braginsky 2004:727–42; Braginsky 2007:xcviii–cxviii.
- 7 The Malay original of this passage is as follows: *Kami berdoa suatu tilam, / Bangun tersentak tengah malam - / Seekor ikan di dalam air dalam, / Sikapnya laksana permata nilam* (Spat, 1903:277).
- 8 The Malay original of this passage is as follows: *Tersedar muda semalam ini, / Dipandang limpah cahaya nurani (...) / Awal mula pertama mulanya / Dikarangkan negeri dengan rajanya (...)* (Van Ronkel, 1921:70–71).

MALAY LITERATURE

- 9 For more details of the traditional Malay idea of how the imagination “works”, see Braginsky 2004:224–28.
- 10 What is meant here is Hamzah Fansuri’s poem beginning with the line *Allahu’l-mawjud terlalu baki* (Allah is the Eternally Existing One), which is numbered XV in the edition by Drewes and Brakel (1986:86–89). To the best of my knowledge, this poem was quoted particularly often by both Hamzah’s proponents and opponents (see Braginsky 2010:381).
- 11 “Malay Concordance Project”. <http://www.anu.edu.au/asianstudies/ahcen/proudfoot/mmp/mmp.html>. Retrieved 5 April 2010.
- 12 For this and other stages of the Sufi path and their symbolism in Sufi allegories, see Braginsky 2007: ciii-cxviii.
- 13 Chittick explains that, according to Ibn al-‘Arabi: “Not every self-disclosure of God can enter into verbal expression, for self-disclosure may occur within the spirit beyond imagination and leave no expressible trace within the soul” (Chittick, 1994:81). As Ibn al-‘Arabi himself says in *Futuhat al-Makkiah*: “Flashes of lightning are compared to the loci of witnessing the Essence in that they have no subsistence” (quoted from Chittick, 1994:81).
- 14 The Malay original of this passage is as follows: *Hatta maka berbunyiilah guruh, petir, halilintar, kilat. Maka kelihatanlah suatu cahaya di tengah padang itu gilang-gemilang. (...) Hatta maka cahaya itu pun berkilat-kilat menjadi awan putih (...), maka awan putih itu menjadi hujan air mawar. Seketika lagi maka berkilat pula cahaya itu kelihatan seperti awan merah. Maka bertiup angin, maka awan itu pun menjadi belah-belah jadi kesturi. Seketika lagi maka berkilat pula kelihatan seperti awan hijau. Maka awan itu belah menjadi hujan narwastu. (...) Maka cahaya itu membesarkan dirinya seraya berbunyi seperti petir bunyinya terlalu hebat. Maka cahaya itu pun menjadi besar seperti memenuhi padang itu, rupanya gilang-gemilang. Maka seketika lagi dilihat Inderaputera hilanglah cahaya itu maka menjadi sebuah taman yang indah-indah rupanya* (Mulyadi & Braginsky, 2007:174–75).
- 15 Bakhtiar quotes a Sufi commentary on the Qur’an, *Surah 55 (Rahman)*, verses 46–66, in which four heavenly gardens are described. “These are interpreted esoterically as four stages through which the mystic travels on the inward journey”. The four gardens are called the Garden of the Soul, the Garden of the Heart, the Garden of the Spirit and the Garden of the Essence” (Bakhtiar, 1976:28). These stages, in turn, correspond to the above-mentioned stages (or stations – *makam*) of



- the Sufi Path, which are called *syariat*, *tarikah*, *hakikat* and *ma'rifat*.
- 16 The Malay original of this passage is as follows: *Syahdan apabila tuan putri berpaling pada kaca merah, maka rupa tuan putri Mengindra Sari Bunga dengan segala pakaiannya semuanya menjadi merah kelihatan. Maka tuan putri berpaling kepada kaca putih, maka warna segala tubuh tuan putri dengan pakaiannya menjadi serba putih. Jika tuan putri berpaling kepada kaca kuning berkata-kata dengan bini segala raja-raja, maka warna tubuh tuan putri serba kuning. Jika tuan putri berpaling pada kaca ungu berkata-kata dengan bini segala menteri, maka warna tubuh tuan putri dengan segala pakaiannya kelihatan ungu* (Mulyadi & Braginsky, 2007:200–01).
  - 17 For a discussion on definitions of these Sufi terms, see Schimmel, 1975:99, 142–43.
  - 18 This is a somewhat different version of *Hikayat Si Burung Pingai* from the manuscript of the Leiden State University Library MS Leiden Cod. Or. 1626 (1). For this manuscript from François Valentijn's collection dated from the early eighteenth century, see Wieringa 1998:26–27. As the manuscript has no date, there is no the year in the reference. Two passages from this *hikayat* quoted below occur only in this version.
  - 19 The Malay text of this phrase is as follows: *Maka rasa di dalam rasa, dan cita di dalam cita, dan sirr suadi (?) di dalam sirr suadi (?)*.
  - 20 English translation of the passage is as follows: 'Ummi (Mother) Fatimah swung and was swung (on the swing). Ummi Salamah swung repeatedly (on it). Ummi Hatijah was swung repeatedly, and swung, and whirled round (on it). Ummi Fatimah swung repeatedly, and was swung, and swung (again). Ummi Salamah was swung again and again and swung. (Ummi) Hatijah swung repeatedly and was swung [above (?)] the East Star, (she) swung above the estuary of the river. All the mothers swung and were swung by (?) the wind, the mothers swung above clouds drifting one after another, the mothers swung above storm-clouds hanging (in the sky). Ummi Salamah swung [on the swing], Ummi Maimunah swung, Ummi Hatijah swung (*Hikayat Si Burung Pingai*, 10).
  - 21 The Malay original of the passage is as follows: *la berbunga tujuh kuntum, kembangnya tujuh kali pada sehari, lagi kembangnya harum, baunya [berisi] seluruh alam. (..) Tiada usa(k) berbunga itu: kembanglah dengan eloknya, kembang dengan harumnya, dan kembang dengan sepertinya, kembang dengan serinya, kembang dengan sucinya, serta dengan pujinya. Bermula kembang menyukat*

*angkasa, kembang memenuhi bumi dari masyrik datang ke maghrib (...), kembang dengan maruahnya, kembang dengan sukacitanya, kembang dengan rahasianya, kembang dengan puji-pujinya (Hikayat Si Burung Pingai, 9).*

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