The Search between Ambiguity and Anti-Story in Zaen Kasturi’s 
*Taman Uzlah*

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**ABSTRACT**

The development of the short story genre in Malay literature is reaching its first century. Malay short stories underwent an experimental phase in the 1970s. It brought about an interesting impact that should be analysed. The experimental decades influenced the short stories produced by young writers in the 1980s, such as Marsli, N.O., Azmah Nordin, Daeng Ramliakil, Muhd Nasruddin Dasuki, Zainal Rashid Ahmad and S.M. Zakir. This essay will focus on short stories written by Zaen Kasturi who not only continues to experiment, but is also creative and innovative in incorporating new and novel elements. This analysis utilises the “anti-narrative” framework to view the non-conformity experimentation model created by Zaen Kasturi. The analysis will focus on his collection of short stories entitled *Taman Uzlah*¹ (2005, DBP) consisting of 20 stories from three earlier collections, *Yuda*² (1992, DBP) *Idola*³ (1997, Sasbadi), *Rapsodi*⁴ (1998, DBP). Based on the short stories in *Taman Uzlah*, it is found that Zaen Kasturi generally portrayed the “search” as an authoritative subjectivity. Therefore, in many occasions in his short stories, Zaen Kasturi engaged an artistic audacity attitude when presenting an issue, in particular, dissent: courage with fiery emotion and artistic sentiments to state what he believes is the truth. Reading method used in this research can generally be used to clarify the message presented by the author.

*Keywords:* Anti-story, experimental short story, Malay literature, Malay short stories, Rapsodi, Taman Uzlah, Yuda, Zaen Kasturi

¹ *Taman Uzlah* means Garden of Uzlah.  
² *Uzlah* refers to isolating oneself from society.  
³ *Yuda* means war.  
⁴ *Idola* means idol.  
⁵ *Rapsodi* means rhapsody.
INTRODUCTION

Zaen Kasturi is one of the names that frequently appears alongside several young writers from the 1980s, including Marsli, N.O., Azmah Nordin, Daeng Ramliakil, Muhd Nasruddin Dasuki, Zainal Rashid Ahmad and S.M. Zakir. Zaen Kasturi took part in the Teen Writers Week or Minggu Penulis Remaja (MPR), first held in 1985, thus marking his involvement in Malay literature for the first time. Furthermore, his seriousness and focus on his studies and activities at Universiti Malaya helped to expand his creativity.

Zaen Kasturi, or his real name Zainal Palit, was born on 16 October, 1964 in Kampung Ladang, Kuala Sungai Baru, Malacca. He received his education at Universiti Malaya and University of London. He served as the editor of Dewan Sastera literary magazine at one time. He is currently with the Islamic Da’wah Foundation Malaysia (Yadim). Zaen Kasturi was the recipient of the 2010 SEA Write Award. He is active in many literary organisations, including the National Writers Association Malaysia (PENA), The Federation of National Writers Association of Malaysia (GAPENA) and the Kuala Lumpur Writers Association (KALAM). Zaen Kasturi has often been invited as a judge for national writing competitions in poetry and short story.

He has produced works in almost all literary genres such as poetry, short story and novels. He has produced two poetry collections, Iga (2005, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka) and Katarsis (1993, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka) and two novels; Angin Belantara (1996, Kharisma Publication) and Fujiyama (1992, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka). To date, Zaen Kasturi has published four collections of short stories: Yuda (1992, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka), Idol (1997, Sasbadi); Rapsodi (1998, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka) and several of his stories from these three collections are compiled in Taman Uzlah (2005, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka). He tends to incorporate references to traditional texts with creative modifications that breathe new meanings to his writings. Zaen Kasturi’s short stories are listed below:

Yuda
1. Warna Katarsis
2. Taman Uzlah
3. Bukan Agitasi Bandel
4. Pertarungan Kedua
5. Gua Zuhud
6. Merpalang
7. Pertemuan Sukma
8. Nurzina
9. Detak Arloji
10. Sat Malangkaii
11. Mafatih Nur
12. Kinanti
13. Warawiri
14. Kata
15. Menyadap Madu Bunga Tongkeng
16. Musim Yuda
17. 777

\(^{5}\) Yuda won Hadiah Sastera Malaysia 1992/1993 (Malaysia Literary Prize)
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**Idola**
1. Sewang
2. Idola
3. Nanti Dulu, Matahari
4. Pertemuan Sukma
5. Risik Hujan di Kaca Jendela
6. Kemerdekaan yang Lain
7. Angin dari Tanah Balkan
8. Warawiri
9. Musim Yuda
10. Dendam
11. Model Cinta Terpana
12. Bulan
13. Saujana Watas Yojana
14. Kubur
15. Kisah Lain tentang Nadim
16. Cerita Atas Cerita
17. Rapsodi
18. Keterbalikan Versi Pesan Raden Panji ‘iv’
19. Nanti Dulu, Matahari
20. Idola

**Rapsodi**
1. Kepang Ala Kuda Kepang
2. Dendam
3. Model Cinta Terpana
4. Keterbalikan Versi Pesan Raden Panji ‘ii’
5. Giri
6. Bulan
7. Saujana Watas Yojana
8. Keterbalikan Versi Pesan Raden Panji ‘iii’
9. Giri
10. Kubur
11. Kisah Lain tentang Nadim
12. Cerita Atas Cerita
13. Catatan Lanang ‘ii’
14. Rapsodi
15. Keterbalikan Versi Pesan Raden Panji ‘iii’

**Taman Uzlah**
1. Warna Katarsis
2. Taman Uzlah
3. Pertarungan Kedua
4. Gua Zuhud
5. Merpalang
6. Sat Malangkaii
7. Warawiri
8. Musim Yuda
9. Kepang Ala Kuda Kepang
10. Dendam
11. Model Cinta Terpana
12. Bulan
13. Saujana Watas Yojana
14. Kubur
15. Kisah Lain tentang Nadim
16. Cerita Atas Cerita
17. Rapsodi
18. Keterbalikan Versi Pesan Raden Panji ‘iv’

*Taman Uzlah,* a collection of short stories in the *Siri Kumpulan Cerpen Pilihan Abad Ke-20* alongside many other collections, features 20 short stories from Zaen Kasturi that are considered to represent conceptually the decade when the situation took place, as written in the foreword by DBP Director-General (p. vii). *Taman Uzlah* short story collection includes stories from as early as 17 July 1988 namely “Warna Katarsis” (*Berita Minggu*) until “Idola” (*Pelita Bahasa*, Jun 1996). Othman (1999) wrote that the non-conformity experiment that Zaen Kasturi brought to Malay short story genre in the 1980s is a continuation of similar writings by writers from the 1970s.

The genre of Malay short story provided a space for many writers in the 1970s to experiment. According to Othman and Ramli in *Sejarah Kesuasteraan Melayu Moden: Cerpen* (2003), the development of Malay literature in the 1970s is frequently
referred to as an experimental decade, taking into account several contributing factors such as the educational background of the local writer, reading materials and engagement with Western literature. Several authors produced works steeped in absurd, surrealistic and semiotic elements, including Othman Puteh, Anwar Ridhwan, Mana Sikana, Abdullah Tahir or Ali Majod (Muhammad, 2008).

They often present ambiguous characters and settings that contain symbolic meanings. The characters frequently engage in internal monologues in order to exemplify the author’s thoughts or “stream of consciousness”. This term is used by William James in *Principles of Psychology* (1890); it is formed at the subconscious level and is a continuous stream of consciousness in thoughts, memories, emotions or images (Cuddon, 1998). Through art, this creativity means that life should not be perceived from the naked eye alone, but also from within, through thoughts, imagination, emotions and the soul of the characters. The location chosen for the setting of the story is not clearly described as found in many conventional short stories.

Zaen Kasturi has shown commitment in continuing this non-conventional method. However, as a creative and innovative writer, Zaen Kasturi has mostly presented new ideas. This paper will study the traditional elements that he kept to and the possible new input that he offers as a versatile writer in drawing the new experimental map through his short stories.

**CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

Zaen Kasturi has a desire to search for something and this is one of the reasons that he produced works that are deemed “astray”, insane and nonsensical. The following discussion is an attempt to read his short stories in *Taman Uzlah*, taking into consideration his “search” in the framework of anti-story.

**Anti-Story**

In a foreword by Philip Stevick (1971, pp. ix-xxiii) about *Anti-Story*, he presented, among others, how to exemplify what is new or what is considered as opposing the existing situation in arts, specifically literature. Several elements that are opposing are:

i. mimesis

ii. reality

iii. event

iv. subject

v. middle range experience

vi. analysis

vii. meaning

viii. scale

This literary analysis aims to highlight several points presented by Stevick illustrated by Zaen Kasturi in *Taman Uzlah*. Through the study of the 20 short stories in *Taman Uzlah*, this research attempts to analyse what is considered new or opposing the existing situation that is non-conformity
in the tradition of experimental Malay short stories.

**ANALYSIS**

*Warna Katarsis* (The Colour of Catharsis) represents Zaen Kasturi’s enthusiasm and deviation in his early creative works. From this short story, Zaen Kasturi started to show his inclination towards metaphorical titles, and later helped to clarify specific meanings hidden throughout the whole short story. Zaen Kasturi admitted that he was ‘fond’ of the titles of his short stories; a title acts as the “driver” for the story and he was disappointed when an editor changed it (1999, p. 88). Why did Zaen Kasturi choose the combination of these words? What is the link between catharsis, the space of emotional tranquillity and colours?

This short story begins against the background of the character “I” painting, playing with colours. There is equipment such as an easel, a brush, a knife, paint bottles and canvas. This was the beginning of colour. What follows is a dialogue between three characters, Sang Bohemian, Sang Senteri and Sang Pelukis (the artist - I); Zaen Kasturi is pointedly “showing” when introducing the characters through dialogues on issues of differences in opinions, beliefs and faiths with the need for mutual respect. The artist’s monologue dominates and takes up a large portion of the short story in order to reiterate his point. Is *I* the author surrogate Zaen Kasturi himself? Isn’t the first person point of view usually much easier for a writer to reiterate his point of view? The character *I* is indeed sensitive towards several viewpoints of his two companions and this created conflict/rage (p. 5). According to *I* what is important is the faith towards the one they worship. Zaen Kasturi uses several ancient terms and Javanese words, for example, *amben*, *ngobrol* and *ambrol*; however, this usage is vague and seldom can be determined if they are associated to the characters or setting.6

Lastly, what is the link that Zaen Kasturi has put forth between *I* being introduced as an artist and the dialogue created? The play of colours is symbolic to *I* ‘s stand and life. The field that *I* chooses is different from his two companions, Bohemian (religion) and Sentri (knowledge), portraying each individual’s choice and identity. The colour of catharsis becomes the ending of the story in the sentence, *Lihatlah dengan mata batin kalian, maya ini penuh dengan warna katarsis!* (Look with your inner eyes, this world is filled with colours of catharsis!) Catharsis acts as a place for cleansing, purging and appeasing emotions. Therefore, the combination of the words *catharsis* and *colours* could either reiterate the personality of *I* / his confidence or his views that his two companions should be aware of the vast space provided to solve human conflicts and grievances.7

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6 These foreign words (Javanese, English) are italicised in the collection of short stories, *Yuda*, but not in *Taman Uzlah*. It is rare to find foreign words in the dictionary like *Kamus Dewan*. This paper made reference to the glossary in *Yuda*. Refer Mawar (2002).

7 *Katarsis* is also the title of a poem by Zaen Kasturi (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1993).
Indeed, that was the take-away from reading the first short story that gave an insight to Zaen Kasturi’s ambiguity. His words are not only used to convey a strong message but are polysemous and contain layered meanings, and do not provide an absolute meaning but invites more doubts. This is due to the many interpretations from the readers who have different reading horizons and understanding. However, isn’t it fair for a work of art to be given a considerable magnitude to be enjoyed?

Othman observed that Zaen Kasturi executed his creative works philosophically, allusively and metaphorically (1999, p. 92). This is clearly exhibited by Zaen Kasturi through “Warna Katarsis” that raised the issue of human dignity using polysemous language that requires deep thinking, full concentration and serious analysis. The message of the short story is delivered by Zaen Kasturi through dialogue, monologue, symbolic setting (painting, colours, canvas) and title.

Other Short Stories in Taman Uzlah

“Taman Uzlah” is also a combination of two words that contain a symbolic meaning (Mawar Safei, 2001). Uzlah means isolation or secluding oneself from others and the conflict faced by the protagonist, Nun. Similar to “Warna Katarsis”, this short story is set against the background of fine art; this branch of art seemingly provides a meaning of its own to the author. Several paintings of women hang on the wall, such as Umegawa, Laila, Monalisa, Cleopatra and Juliet become characters that spoke to Nun. Zaen Kasturi uses the in medias res method where the female characters were suddenly startled or angered, felt tragic and sadistic when Nun punched and injured them because they were smiling cynically and jeered at him (p. 9).

Likewise, in Nun’s mysterious dream, he met an old man in a white robe, with a long beard that reached his chest, his right hand was clasping an orange flower, there were dazzling turquoise rays emitting in between its petals. The man carried a piece of empty canvas and requested Nun to draw a portrait of a woman whom he saw from his inner eye. The presence of this man suffocated Nun and he wanted to kill him immediately,

“Old man, if you are to come now, I will kill you. You come without any sign knocking at my institution. I do not need your face. Ah! Perhaps you have conquered many women through their dreams. Rascal! Why do you rob me of my right?” (p. 10)

... 

“Damn!” cursed Nun. His cursings were drowned by the jeering that echoed louder and louder. (p. 14)

Whether it was to strengthen his ego or otherwise, Nun became offensive; presenting a character that is angry and self-centred. However, Nun’s anger and complex emotions were soothed by the orange flower
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and *turquoise light*; Nun was brought to a garden filled with flowers and a woman, Ayn. This is *taman uzlah* and Ayn had been waiting for Nun for a long time. The *orange flower* and *flowery garden* meant something beautiful, fragrant and peaceful. Meanwhile, the *turquoise light* (a type of bluish jewel) is very enchanting and able to calm one’s emotions. This short story ends with Ayn reminding Nun of his promise to God in Lohmahfuz and to read surah an-Nur: 44.

A detailed reading of this short story will reveal the moment when Nun met Ayn (an ambiguous choice of names; *Nun, Ayn*, pronunciation of the jawi alphabets that are also among the first few letters in the surah and complement the surah *Nur*)\(^8\) breaks the conflict between Nun and the female portraits and the old man. Nun in the subconscious realm lives with his paintings or is this a surrealistic world conjured by Zaen Kasturi who eventually submits to the greatness of Allah? *Allah arranges night and day and that is ibrah (lesson) to those who can see.* Or at the end, Ayn (which means eye in Arabic) sees the truth, highlights the content, importance and authenticity (this is also the meaning of *ain* or *ayn*) in the discontinuities and chaos of Nun as a person. Nun’s *search* is like Aku (or *I*) in “*Warna Katarsis*”, worked in through the reflection / dialogue with other characters that are presented, the Old Man and Ayn. The search finally ends with a meeting with the Supreme Creator, Allah The Almighty.

Mana mentions most of this spiritual aspect in *Yuda* (1994, pp. 86-91).

Zaen Kasturi definitely does not map out the expedition to *Taman Uzlah* with a straight path, hence, is this common complaint from readers that it is *difficult* to follow this story and many other stories by Zaen Kasturi? Zaen Kasturi himself admits that the important part of his work is to enter the *difficult* zone in his works because it is a *delight* (1999, p. 98). Are the readers of *Taman Uzlah* able to enjoy it? In my opinion, with the identified formula starting from “*Warna Kartasis*”, Zaen Kasturi’s short stories are means to seek himself with confidence, dignity and truth. It can be seen through his choice of titles, methods of metaphor, issues debated by the characters and the keyword search (journey, goals and setting that is the destination or point of exit).

Isn’t this means a grace that is abstract but subconsciously a natural, basic desire as recorded in surah Sajdah: 53, “*We will show them Our manifest signs (proofs) in the horizons of the universe and within their own selves, until it will become manifest to them that it (the Qur’ān) is indeed the truth*”. Isn’t knowing oneself a way to know Allah?

The short story “*Merpalang*” also features a character identical to The Artist and Nun, called Syafawi. From the start, Zaen Kasturi uses the symbol *merpalang*; a type of bird known as Malaysian eared

\(^8\) *Nun* is the first letter in surah al-Qalam, while *ayn* is among the first letters in surah Maryam (*kaf, ha, ya, ayn, sod*).
nightjar (Lyncornis temminckii) that is often associated with superstitious belief that it portends disasters.\(^9\) The \textit{search} in this short story is explained through the characteristics of the bird, which is often viewed as a seeker, and Syafawi’s job as a sailor. The dialogue between Syafawi and Hakimin is used as the technique to harness the “search”. Syafawi explained that what will be brought back to his family comprises sea corals, sea water and wings of the sea gull wings as symbols of solidarity with the universe (p. 45-46). Zaen Kasturi returns to present ambiguous symbols and meaning of this “search”, as written below,

... sometimes this ocean is like an everlasting space. Only the fierce spirit who spoke in languages that are difficult to translate while our instincts are somehow thrown into the sky. We may be here but in reality all of our being and soul are punished by the impermanence of it all. Our temporary presence and limited movement have been written and enacted. Fate has spoken before us. (p. 47)

The story “Gua Zuhud” features the character I, Lam Alif, who wanted to return to the cave after committing adultery with an immoral woman. Lam Alif longed for the moon and cave that smelled of narwastu (spikenard) that he had left for a long time. The moon is very significant in the first verse of Surah al Qamar in the Quran, “the hour has come near and the moon has split”.\(^10\)

In this story, the moon is greatly anticipated by Lam Alif, the moon is a carrier of light, guidance, hope and whatever names one calls a saviour,

... So the night came and the day fell to its rightful place, he never failed to call the moon. At times, even the glare of lightning was mistaken for the rays of the moon. At that moment, he was ready to cheer; but it turns out that the moon did not appear as if its glow was stolen by a million tezi horses (magical horses) (p. 33)

Is this also a self-insertion by Zaen Kasturi? Similarly, the cave is loaded with hidden meanings in Surah Al-Kahf (9-15) and its chain of history in surah Iqra’: 1-5 or in Taubah: 57. Gua Zuhud becomes the fate that reveals the place (closed, hidden) for Lam Alif to distance himself from worldly luxuries and merriment. The cave is a sanctuary and refuge. He was also disturbed by voices that came from within him, and sometimes the voice resembled his late

\(^9\) This meaning is found in the glossary in \textit{Yuda}. ‘Merpalang’ is not found in \textit{Kamus Dewan}.

\(^{10}\) What is meant by that moment is the end of days or the destruction of non-believers and the moon is split is the miracle of Prophet Muhammad. Refer Hasbi (1971, p. 878).
father; Is this a calling to return to the righteous path?

The short story “Warawiri” however, carried a resigned or pessimistic tone when “we” confronted with obstacles in the form of barkhan, yardang and zuegen\(^\text{11}\) and they will be history that is deliberately wasted. Warawiri means (i) hibiscus, and (ii) walking aimlessly; contextually, the short story leans more towards the second meaning. The character “we” are dreaming, becoming a spectator of a girl who is singing until they start to laugh at their own stupidity (p. 70). They almost did not find anything in the foggy search and that ignorance becomes the fate of those who choose not to think.

The strong desire to seek truth and justice is echoed again in the short story “Pertarungan Kedua” which starts with snippets from cetera keenam belas (the sixteenth story) on Hang Tuah who was sentenced to death by the Sultan and hoped to return and fight against Kasturi (Kassim, 1995). This was taken from Sulalat al-Salatin (the ninth story). In this short story, Zaen Kasturi uses verisimilitude in the fight between Tuah and Kasturi while in the Malay mind, the duel is between Tuah and Jebat (Tun Seri Lanang, 1997). The same goes that the soul and spirit of Kasturi is revived because physically Kasturi has already died (p. 22) and the spirit of Kasturi is seeking justice from the current generation.

It is obvious that this short story uses ancient words that can be attributed to Zaen Kasturi’s reading of old texts or perhaps materials from Indonesia. It must be remembered that Zaen Kasturi is an established poet and he has a wide and creative range of vocabulary. The usage of archaic words becomes an idiosyncrasy for Zaen Kasturi every time his work is discussed.

“Sat Malangkaii”, is a short story adapted from the Bugis community’s Tuhfat al-Nafis. Zaen Kasturi developed it into a character that witnessed the intelligence, silliness, strengths, weaknesses, grandeur and downfall of his people. Here lies the “search” to improve the meaning of life. It appears that Zaen Kasturi sees traditional texts as a means to create the future (Mohamad, 1999, p. 89) and when it is transferred to the short story medium it provides a space to predict, assume, suggest and create for the future. It is apparent that Zaen Kasturi hopes for a life filled with mutual respect, often balanced with justice and wisdom.

Another short story that was adapted from a traditional text is “Other Stories about Nadim.” Here, Zaen Kasturi creates a sense of defamiliarisation in order to find a more constructive meaning from the ancient text. Zaen Kasturi revives Nadim, the smart young boy who gave his idea to the king and adults in order to save the lives

\(^{11}\) Barkhan is a sand hill shaped like a horn or crescent moon in the desert; yardang is a dry lake in the desert; zuegen are stone pillars formed by wind movements in dry land. These explanations are found in Yuda glossary or in many physical geography books.
of the people. However, his intelligence was seen as a threat and an obstacle that must be destroyed. Nadim was rescued by Pak Tua (Old Man) at sea after he was thrown into the ocean. When he turned 25 years old, Nadim, who now lives in an island with Pak Tua, frequently observes the island from far and the island is now,

*The land becomes a shady tree for seekers of wealth, and a barren tree under the hot sun for seekers of knowledge and truth. Even if amongst them there are those who are intelligent and knowledgeable, they must follow the dictates of the Wisesa* (p. 167).

Wisdom is the enemy of the authorities and that is the message that the author aims to deliver. Thus, began Zaen Kasturi’s “search”. Through Nadim, the “search” is to set the heart so that past mistakes will not be repeated. Thus, when looking for an answer to whether he should leave his new island or return to the island of his birth, Nadim found a boat that contained two things,

“... a paddle and an axe. If I take the paddle, it means I will sail back to my homeland and live there, dear remote island. And if I take the axe, it means that I will have to destroy the boat, and I will not sail home. I will be a loyal inhabitant of this island. Yes, I have to make the best decision right now. Axe or paddle?”

*With the most willing smile, he reaches for the...* (p. 171).

Zaen Kasturi’s non-conformist style of interpreting what he understood from literary tradition is what Barthes called mirage of citations in the intertextuality framework (Culler, 1981, p. 102). It then provides the magnitude for readers to consider the original text as a code provider and uncover the meaning in the contemporary text. Culler reiterated the same point that what could be interpreted today is the goal (1981, p. 100). Zaen Kasturi brings back excerpts from pages of text from his Malay roots. Through what is considered as mirage, Zaen Kasturi dug, searched and brought to surface what is the truth that can be filtered and eventually brings benefit to the duality of relationship in man.

As seen in many of the background settings for his stories in *Taman Uzlah*, Zaen Kasturi carried out many of deviations outlined by Stevick (1971) in his “search”. The writer does not seem to reproduce what he sees or what is happening in front of him, but instead challenges the realities and events that should occur in the name of justice, truth and dignity. In general, what was analysed by Zaen Kasturi contained polyphonic meanings even though they appear casual, minor and almost unimportant. He also tends to ignore the space allocated in literature for short stories. Instead he focuses on grabbing the opportunity and fate; Zaen Kasturi only wants to express human desires and ambitions through his works. Therefore, is the audience ready to accept his deviations in *Taman Uzlah*?
CONCLUSION
A number of short stories in Taman Uzlah that were discussed in this paper generally places the “search” as an authoritative subjectivity, found through the guidance offered by Stevick on Anti-Story. Thus, in many settings in his short stories, Zaen Kasturi adopts an artistic audacity in presenting issues and contradictions as well as courage coupled with fiery emotions to state what he believes to be the truth. To have the courage to stand up for the truth is the slogan (theme) found in many of Zaen Kasturi’s short stories. The author, a recipient of the SEA Write Award 2010, in many cases, frequently chooses not to end his “search” for his own audience, as it should be determined by one’s inner eye. Certainly his writings, steeped in symbolism, philosophical dialogues, Zaen Kasturi’s inner voice with his inclination to use ancient words will eventually produce ambiguous meanings that invite doubts. Did Zaen Kasturi not highlight the fact that I write for readers who “want to read” and “want to think”?

REFERENCES


