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The focus of this journal is to provide readers on understanding of Indonesia and International affairs related to religious literature and heritage and its present developments through publication of articles, research reports, and books reviews.

Heritage of Nusantara specializes in religious studies in the field of literature either contemporarily or classically and heritage located in Southeast Asia. This journal warmly welcomes contributions from scholars of related disciplines.

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READING POPULAR ISLAMIC LITERATURE: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN INDONESIAN LITERATURE

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Abstract

In the last few years, literature on Islamic themes has become increasingly popular in Indonesia. It is commonly categorized as Islamic literature identified by Islamic texts and symbols on the book cover and its content. The literary works have been popular as reflected in the record sales figures. Previously, some literary works dealing with Islamic themes failed to gain public attention. Interestingly, those works are not mentioned by people as Islamic literature. This paper aims to discuss some questions on why are some literary works on Islamic theme mentioned as Islamic while others are not? Is there Islamic literature within Indonesian literature? What are the differences between Islamic literature and kitab literature (sastra kitab) written by Muslim scholars in the Malay world? By exploring the social context of reader responses toward selected literary works on Islam, this study reveals that the label of Islamic literature is created to confront opposite themes in Indonesian literature. The term Islamic literature remains a problematic and debatable issue related to literature based on Islamic themes in both old and modern Indonesian literature.

Keywords: *Islamic literature, popular novel, kitab literature*

Abstrak

Dalam beberapa tahun terakhir, karya sastra bertema Islam semakin populer di Indonesia. Jenis karya sastra tersebut galib dikategorikan sebagai sastra islami dengan mempertimbangkan teks-teks dan simbol-simbol baik dalam isinya maupun sampulnya. Popularitasnya juga dapat ditilik dari catatan penjualannya. Sebelumnya, beberapa karya sastra yang bermuatan tema Islam telah gagal untuk menarik perhatian publik. Menariknya, karya-karya sebelumnya itu tidak disebut oleh masyarakat sebagai sastra Islam. Tulisan ini bertujuan untuk mendiskusikan pertanyaan tentang mengapa beberapa karya sastra bertema Islam disebut Islam sedangkan yang lain tidak? Apakah sejatinya ada sastra islam dalam diskursus sastra Indonesia? Apa perbeda an antara sastra islam dengan sastra kitab yang ditulis oleh para ulama Muslim di dunia dunia Melayu berabad-abad lalu? Dengan mengeksplorasi konteks sosial respons pembaca terhadap karya sastra terpilih, studi ini menyatakan bahwa label sastra islam diciptakan untuk melawan tema-tema sastra yang berlawanan. Istilah sastra islam sendiri menyisakan perdebatan dan problematika dalam kesastraan Indonesia baik itu sastra lama maupun sastra baru.

Kata Kunci: *sastra Islam, novel populer, sastra kitab*

Background

In the last few years, literature based on Islamic themes has become increasingly popular in Indonesia. Most book shops display Islamic novels commonly identified by Islamic symbols either on the book cover or its blurb. The popularity regarding Islamic literature can be seen through the quantity of copies, the places where the novels are displayed in the bookstores, such as in the bestsellers section, and the reader responses. Some of the books have been made into films and the movies recorded spectacular box office sales.

The current phenomena of popular Islamic novels emerged a few years after the overthrow of the Suharto era. In general, novels that focus on young Muslim readers' interests have become popular (Graf, 2007). The most prominent novel, *Ayat-ayat Cinta* (Verses of love), is a good example of the current type of popular novels. *Ayat-ayat Cinta* was written by Habiburrahman El-Shirazy and first published in 2004. Since then it has sold more than 700,000 copies and reached its 35th reprint level (Arnez, 2009: 24; Rani, 2012: 61). Likewise the adaptation of the film version attracted the current generation of young people and had an audience of more than 4 million (Widodo, 2008). This success story of popular Islamic novels inspired other similar genres such as *Syahadat Cinta* (Divine pledge of love, 2006), *Musafir Cinta* (Traveller of love, 2007), and *Makrifat Cinta*

(Mystical knowledge of love, 2007) by Taufiqurrahman Al-Azizy, *Kasidah-kasidah Cinta* (Divine verses of love, 2007) by Muhammad Muhyidin, *Tahajjud Cinta* (Night prayer of love, 2008) by Muhammad El-Natsir, *Berselimut Sorban Cinta* (Covered in the veil of love, 2008) by Irwanto K., and Hilmi As'ad's *Tasawuf Cinta* (Mysticism of love, 2008) the novels were written by the new generation of Indonesian writers (Rani, 2012). Other novels such as *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* by Abidah El-Khaleqy, *Laskar Pelangi* by Andrea Hirata, and *Negeri Lima Menara* by Anwar Fuadi also received an overwhelmingly good readers' response. Similar to *Ayat-ayat Cinta,* the novels were also made into films and gathered huge audiences.

As a consequence of public interest in the Islamic novels, there were approximately 50 new novels produced between 2007 to 2008 and made available in the common Indonesian bookstores of Gramedia, Toga Mas, Social Agency, Gunung Agung, Erlangga, Uranus, and various book exhibitions in some metropolitan cities. According to Muzakki (2011: 34-35), the early twenty-first century witnessed the significant increase of popular Islamic publications, particularly the popular Islamic novels. Many factors influenced the trend of new Islam literature, issues such as the social movements of Islamic groups like the Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), and some literacy movements in communities around the Indonesian archipelago. The most relevant factor was the advent of literacy communities established at that time. *Forum Lingkar Pena* or Pen circle forum (FLP), *Komunitas Matapena*, *Rohis* (*Kerohanian Islam*, Islamic spirituality) and other group loving activities of reading and writing have also catalyzed the massif desire to read Islamic novels. These communities have gradually affected teenage and young readers' tastes because they not only publish books but also discuss and develop the reading and writing skills of the young generation.

Even though FLP has more than 5,000 members in 23 provinces in Indonesia and encourages the young generation to read Islamic novels, the phenomena of popular Islamic literature is closely related to the existence of the so-called "*sastra wangi*" (fragrant literature) of the 1990s to the early 2000s. It (? What) remarks a significant boom in literature written by young female authors, addressing topics and themes previously deemed taboo. The *sastra wangi* offers emancipation and freedom of expression for women on the one hand, and mushrooming bookstores with vulgar pornographic content on the other. The leading authors of this literary stream are Ayu Utami, Dewi Lestari, and Dinar Ayu.

There has been an intense debate about the polemic trends of Indonesian literature, the so-called *sastra wangi* or *sastra selangkangan* and Islamic literature. The first trend was exemplified in popular novels, such as *Larung* by Ayu Utami which was awarded a prestigious honor by Dewan Kesenian Jakarta. A few years later, other novels on Islamic themes became popular which were represented by novels such as *Ayat-ayat cinta* and *Aku Malu Berkata Islam*. Both of the trends have contra perspectives related to narrate social phenomena within Indonesian's social context. While *Larung* emphasized women's emancipation, freedom, and anti-domestication, *Ayat-ayat Cinta* strengthened the role of women in the domestic area, including obedience to their husbands.

The polemic issues are related to the ways the messages and lessons are presented to readers and to the subject and material topics themselves. The so-called *sastra wangi* was accused of being a profane work, disgracing Islamic norms and sacred values. Rather than promoting moral messages and lessons, the so-called secular novels were perceived as being less than beneficial to the majority of the Muslim population. For the most part, the works of prominent novelists, such as Ayu Utami, are commonly referred to as the new literary stream of *sastra wangi*. By definition, the term sastra wangi means that the work of these novelists exploit sexuality and sensuality, the literature appears to represent the generation of young, savvy, and urban women writers (Allen, 2007).

To the contrary, the so called Islamic literature has been criticized for being too much *da'wah*-oriented (Islamic proselytising). It has hence been perceived as no longer categorized as the literature genre of novels, but fitting more in the genre that represents religious books. Hadi Susanto, a literary critic, admited that many Islamic novels exploit Islamic messages in ways that are too vulgar and negelect the essence and basic principles of literary styles. Much of the existing so-called Islamic literature, according to Susanto, has lost the characteristics of the intended literature genre (Susanto, 2008).

The discussion about Islamic novel literature intensified when Habiburrahman El-Shirazy published his phenomenal novel of *Ayat-ayat cinta*, combining the principle and style of literature and Islamic values. The presentation of the novel served as an alternative way to deal with Western cultural domination and particular secularism which are quite hegemonic over the existing socio-political and cultural realms in Indonesia. This domination has become so strong that the cultural landscape in Indonesia is increasingly Westernized. As a result, Western

cultural modes have become trendsetters. The novel literature genre is only one example of the cultural products in which the domination of Western culture and secularism are presented through the so-called *sastra wangi* and through other kinds of literature which are not concerned with Islamic propagation (Widodo, 2008).

Research Questions and Objectives

The popularity of Islamic novels in Indonesia today raises some questions. How are some literary works based on Islamic themes considered to be Islamic while others are not? Are there Islamic literature genres within Indonesian literature? What are differences between Islamic literature and *kitab* literature (*sastra kitab*) characteristics as written by Muslim scholars in the Malay world?

Based on the previous questions, this paper aims to achieve two objectives: to analyze and determine the debate of term *sastra Islam* (Islamic literature) rather than literature with Islamic themes in the studies of Indonesia literature, and to draw a conclusion on the comparative term *sastra kitab* (kitab literature) which occurred in the nusantara region before Indonesia's independence.

Islamic Literature: History and Context

In some cases, the Indonesian literary society tends to be talkative or speech imitation (*latah*) when someone uses particular terms or concepts with regard to phenomenal issues. Debatable terms such as *sastra sufi* (Sufi literature), *sastra kontekstual* (contextual literature), *sastra pedalaman* (literary hinterland), *sastra pinggiran* (marginal literature), *sastra koran* (newspaper literature), and several other terms raised sensational responses and created polemic issues. A few years later, some novels enriched with Islamic themes were written and they attracted public attention. Based on the popularity of Islamic themed novels, the term *sastra Islam* (Islamic literature) became popular when referring to these novels. The term is the opposite of the previous contradictory term of fragrant literature. Islamic literature uses a form of written dialogue that leads the reader to assume novels revolves around the figure of a Muslim who appears as a perfect human being, one without vices. The Islamic literature genre is about the ideal model of Islamic individual who maintains Islamic practices.

The discussion of Islamic literature is often conceptual and does not have a solid theoretical foundation. Tracing back to early Indonesian literature, the prominent scholar and writer Buya Hamka, wrote two

novels that are good examples, *Di Bawah Lindungan Ka'bah* (Under Kabah Protection) and *Tenggelamnya Kapal van der Wijck* (Sinking van der Wijck Ship). Both novels reflect his identity as a scholar and Muslim intellectual. In fact, the novels are about failed love and do not excessively exploit the use of Islamic symbols. The story lines of Zainuddin-Hayati and Hamid-Zainab are similar to other "secular" novels such as *Azab dan Sengsara* by Merari Siregar and *Sitti Nurbaya* by Marah Rusli. The social settings of Hamka's works definately showed Islamic millieu and its nuance. The end of the story narrating Hamid's death in Mecca is similar to the setting of Fahri's love (*Ayat-ayat Cinta*) in Egypt; thus the question arises: Is it appropriate to simply categorize the work as Islamic literature?

Even though the literary works were explicitly enriched with Islamic doctrine, there were no discussions categorizing the works as Islamic literature; during the time of the literary writing by Muslim scholars such as Hamka, Jamil Suherman, Danarto, Ikranegara, Mohammad Ali, and Ahmad Tohari. In the early 1960s and before some writers, affiliated with Institute of People's Culture (Lekra) attacked Hamka's novel *Tenggelamnya Kapan van der Wicjk* with an accusation of plagiarism, Djamil Suherman published a novel entitled *Perjalanan ke Akherat* (Journey into the Hereafter, 1963). The novel is a dialog in the hereafter featuring the figure of a teacher who, because of his honesty, entered heaven, and his wife—because of her suicide—who was stranded in the hereafter. The tale describes Islamic doctrine as the basis for imagining a human being's life after death. Before the novel, Muhammad Ali also used a religious theme in his novel, *Di Bawah Naungan al-Qur'an* (Under the Shade of the Quran, 1957). In that novel, the Islamic atmosphere described in the novel was strongly evident, and yet the novel was not categorized as of novel (literature) of Islam. The same is true of other literary works such as *Siklus* (1975) by Mohammad Diponegoro and *Kubah* (1980) by Ahmad Tohari which clearly tell stories related to Islamic doctrines of moral values. Furthermore, some short stories by both Diponegoro and Tohari actively promote sufism (Islamic mystics) stories. A short story written by Danarto entitled *Lempeng-lempeng Cahaya* absolutely portrayed Islamic nuances within the narration, such as using *al-fatihah* (a fist sura in the al-Qur'an) as a main character. However, there were no categorizations of Islamic literature for any of these works.

In the 1970s, Abdul Hadi WM, Danarto, Fudoli Zaini, Ikranegara, Sutardji Calzoum Bachri, Taufiq Ismail, and several other writers

introduced their conception of Islamic literature to the public. However, the term of Islamic literature did not represent the full meaning of Islam because, during the same time, there were other concepts of sastra sufi (sufism literature) and sastra profetik (prophetic literature) that reflected Islamic tenets even without categorizing the collective writings as Islamic literature.

The historical view of literature maintaining Islamic doctrine, in the Nusantara archipelago before independence of Indonesia, revealed that Islamic themes were found within the genre of *Hikayat* and/or *Sastra Kitab* (kitab/Islamic book literature). While there are studies on Islamic literature, including numerous written offerings of Muslim writers (Rosenthal, 1968; Winstedt, 1991), some scholars stated that literature containing Islamic theology, mysticism, tafsir/interpretation of Qur'an, and other Muslim activities should be categorized as *sastra kitab*. Braginsky (1998: 276) identified sastra kitab as a main element of Malay literature written by Malay Muslim writers especially when the language of the works was influenced by Arabic syntax. It means that sastra kitab not only portrayed Islamic doctrine but also included Arabic words. Other scholars argued that sastra kitab writing emphasized Islamic mysticism or *tasawuf* teaching (Baried, Yock Fang). The work of Hamzah Fansuri, Nuruddin Ar Raniri, and Raja Ali Haji provided evidence that the sastra kitab genre existed.

While the term Islamic literature stems from the Muslim world view, the specific Arabic term of *adab islami* refers to a committed literature with the aim of propagating an Islamic vision of the world (Cayir, 2007). *Adab Islami* in the Indonesian context is usually associated with sastra kitab, sastra sufi, and sastra profetik. From the era of nusantara to the early 2000s of *Reformasi* Indonesia, the term *Islamic literature* was not recognized as phenomenal term. Sastra sufi seemed to define literature containing Islamic mysticism and sastra profetik and sastra kitab narrated Islamic vision. Before independence, some scholars used the term *sastra Islam Melayu* for works propagating Islamic tenets (Morison, Munir Ali).

The interesting issue here is the emergence of the term Islamic literature, introduced after some popular Islamic novels published and widely distributed. The story lines of novels such as *Ayat-ayat Cinta*, *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban*, and *Tahajud Cinta*, had no special characteristics when compared other Indonesia novels with Muslim society settings like *Pasar* by Kuntowijoyo, *Geni Jora* by Abidah Al-Khalieqy, *Laskar Pelangi* by Andrea Hirata, *Hubbu* by Mashuri, and *Kambing & Hujan* by Mahfud Ikhwan. The novel *Ayat-ayat Cinta* appeared outside the

mainstream of Islam literature. Fahri had Islamic characteristics including convincing Egyptian backgrounds, the rectangular pattern of romance that was retained in *muhrim-not muhrim* was an important part that made it different from other novels published previously. The writing had a smooth flowing narrative and a wealth Arabic expressions. The style seemed somewhat hyperbolic. One important element of the novel was the happy ending!

Questionable Issues within Islamic Literature

The novel *Ayat-ayat* is discussed further. Fahri was the main character and lived in a flat with a friend, Rudi, Hamdi, Saiful. Life in a boarding school or *pesantren* provided the patterns of interaction. When Fahri's proposal to write a thesis was passed, he expressed his gratitude in these words, "I feel like I stroked the hand of God." Fahri brought friends together and they ate grilled chicken, demonstrating how a simple party could spread happiness. The question is posed, what is the meaning of the story fragment?

For urban communities, the concept of a party with the music and couples (of the opposite sex) may be usual experience for the students. However, for Fahri it was outside of his normal experience. In that context, Ayat-ayat Cinta managed to convincingly present an event that was usual in the daily lives of public school students. Yet what was familiar and comfortable for certain population groups, can and often does feel "weird" to other communities that do not have any experience related to the event. Thus, it can be presumed, that the certain community groups enchanted Ayat-ayat Cinta.

Although in many ways, Ayat-ayat Cinta featured life laden with an Islamic atmosphere, it does not mean that novel belongs in the category of Islamic literature. Ayat-ayat Cinta is seen as inspiring, presenting moral messages, and even as enlightening to the soul. It is important to note, that it does not mean that other novels should be considered profane if they do not offer moral messages. Ayat-ayat Cinta can be compared to other novels such as Atheis Achdiat written by Karta Mihardja. The novel Atheis Achdiat also presented a moral and enlightened message—at least for some readers—about the importance of maintaining a constant faith. In this case, we can see from Fahri's persona the the ideal human figure that is physically perfect. Meaning, he did not have psychological problems like other peole.

The readers' infatuation with Islamic story lines and symbols created a motive for writers to imitate the genre, a scenario that was often repeated in the history of Indonesian literature. There was also the emergence of discourse that was actually based more on assumptions about the novels rather than understanding the full meaning of Islam literature.

Ayat-Ayat Cinta is the case for Islam literature. The novel tells the story of Fahri's personhood, ideologically he exemplified the image of Muslim youth plenary; perfect in every way. He was illustrated as smart and intelligent, handsome and dignified, good-natured and caring (especially for the plight of women), brave, tenacious and a defender of human values, diligent (he did not surrender until he met success), tolerant and respectful of others based on the aura of love, insight and humility. In sum, all the goodness and perfection of a man was attached to the central character.

As an effort to propagate an ideology, the intent was that main characters with exemplary characteristics would support the current political images. Such writing becomes an effective propaganda technique that instills values. In the literature, such techniques are usually applied in the genre of prose—novels or short stories—rather than to poetry or drama. Prose is usually expressed through a narrative. Prose normally represents a portrait of life. Thus, the novel Ayat-ayat Cinta was created as a portrait of the ideal behavior for young Muslims. From there then arises the view that *Ayat-ayat Cinta* can actually be placed as a novel (literature) Islam. The author managed to present a story that is in line with the readers' expectations who idolize Islamic values. The author initiated a trend and spread transformed writing that became a mass uproar.

Additionally, the success of Ayat-ayat Cinta cannot be removed simply from the psychological factors the readers of Indonesian literature expect and desire. It is important to remember the 2004 era when Ayat-ayat Cinta was published; at that time Indonesia was hit by a literary echo, reflecting the spirit of exploiting the body. Or, at least, the novels that were published in the early 2000s were dominated by women writers who included Gender (male-female) related content. For example, the works of Ana Mary, Stefani Hid, Dinar Rahayu, Maya Wulan, Riyanti Joseph, or Djenar Maesa Ayu. Ayat-ayat Cinta was presented at the right time, when most readers of Indonesian literature became bored with novels that included gender scenes. Such novels are considered by the majority of Indonesian readers as not in accordance with the deontology of Indonesia.

The emergence of polemic discussions about sex in Indonesian literature provided a venue for noting the pros and cons of diverse literature genres. The discussions are a forum for discussing the bored-weariness on the theme of sex on the one hand, and the spirit of free literature offering various aspects, including the burden of ideology, on the other. Thus, when Ayat-ayat Cinta was presented, it seemed to represent an alternative to the expression of bored-weariness related to other literature types. It was like the "ultimate weapon" that answered the attraction and rivalry discussed earlier. The rivalry of two waves of literature that seem irreconcilable.

As a material analogy, the phenomena that occurs in the Harry Potter novels can be use as an example. Harry Potter, to young readers, in many ways offers hope that not all adventure stories are without merit. Although the Harry Potter hoopla was inseparable from the role of mass media, Harry Potter managed to present all horizons of hope for the readers. The same experience was related to the Ayat-ayat Cinta in the crowd of novels with the same themes that were unable to fully meet the readers' expectations.

An important question is: why was the Geni Jora novel (2004) by Abidah El Khalieqy never mentioned (which is also among the rows of the woman novelists)? If viewed from the spirit of putting the ideal image of a Muslim figure, Geni Jora was no less substantial. The main character in the novel fought the stigma of women in the Islamic tradition, Javanese culture and Arab cultures. The character of Kejora, for example, was placed in boarding schools for women, raised with freedom and independence in Morocco. She dealt with Zakky Hedouri (the Indo-Arab-European, Don Juan) and the dashing and wealthy adventurers, along with the admired figure Asaav (a man of the Jewish community of Ashkenaz). Ideologically, Geni Jora offered a new paradigm by placing women in the Islamic view.

In that context, it is clear that the problem of the rivalry between the two waves of literature occurs at the level expectations of Ayat-ayat Cinta readers who are motivated by desires to fight against themes that are considered contrary. Resistance long unspoken suddenly gained a voice after the channel AAC brought on a wave of furor. This is where the emerging consciousness to create a label as a marker of identity for Islam literature. Thus, Islamic literature label attached to the novel Ayat-ayat Cinta as one of their icons, does in fact show the identity banner. The Geni Jora novel does not count, of course, because the author is not in line with the readers' expectations. The novel did not mean to spoil the reader's emotions, and it should be noted that the central figure Morning appears as the ideal woman.

Concluding Remarks

The advent of Islamic literature is identified by the publication of the *Ayat-ayat Cinta* novel. The concept of Islamic literature has been influenced by many factors such as political trends within Islam, social movements of Islamic groups, and some literacy movements in communities across the Indonesian archipelago. Public acceptance is evident from the fact more than 700,000 copies were sold and the novel is in the 35th reprinting. People identify the novel as Islamic literature based on the characters, environtment, and symbols which evoke an Islamic stance.

Theoretically, the term *Islamic literature* remains a debatable issue because many Indonesian literary works have similar contexts and characters but they are not categorized as Islamic literature. The work of Buya Hamka *Di Bawah Lindungan Ka'bah, Pasar* by Kuntowijoyo*, Geni Jora* by Abidah Al-Khalieqy*, Laskar Pelangi* by Andrea Hirata*, Hubbu* by Mashuri*,* and *Kambing & Hujan* by Mahfud Ikhwan have similar contexts in narrating Indonesian Islam. Even if the literature maintains Islamic doctrine as a theme, it may not be considered Islamic literature as evidenced in the Nusantara archipelago, where literature that relates to Islamic themes is called *sastra kitab* and *sastra sufi,* for particular Islamic mysticism themes. Sastra kitab not only includes Islamic doctrine but also employs Arabic words.

In fact, the popularity of Islamic literature cannot be extracted from the psychological factors of Indonesia's literary readers. When the term, *Islam literature,* was connected with the publication of *Ayat-ayat Cinta*, Indonesia was hit by a literary echo, the spirit of exploiting the body. Since the early 2000s Indonesian readers seemed to become bored and tired of reading the sexual and gender themes. At that time, the works of Ayu Utami, Ana Mary, Stefani Hid, Dinar Rahayu, Maya Wulan, Riyanti Joseph, or Djenar Maesa Ayu dominated Indonesian literary publications. Many people missed the spiritual stories, especially those with Islamic practices that countered the exploitation of former themes.

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The number of the words is between 10000 to 15.000 words. References, tables, figures, appendices and notes are included in those words. As for the abstract is 150 words with 5 key words. The articles with quotations and passages from local or foreign language should be translated into English. Electronic submissions are welcome and should be sent to mail journal.

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3. Reference to mailbase/listserve e-mail lists (author, time (day, month, year), subject, Discussion List (online) Available from

and accessed date: e.g. Brack, E.V. (2 May 1995). Re: Computing Short Courses. List Link (online) Available from: mailbase@mailbase.ac.uk (Accessed 17 Aprl 1996).

4. Reference to Personal Electronic Communication (E-mail): Senders, time (day, month, year), Subject of Message. Email to Recipient: e.g. Lowman, D. (Deborah-lowman@pbsinc.com). (4 April 1996). RE>> ProCite and Internet Refere. E-mail to P. Cross (pcross@bournemouth.ac.uk).
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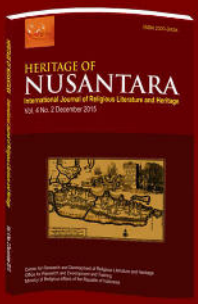
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