



# Painting: Budi Darma's Concept of Art in the Novel *Olenka*

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**Abstract.** Many critics consider Budi Darma's *Olenka* as a novel of ideas, and an interesting issues narrated in the novel is the idea of the art of writing and painting. This is seen in the characterization Olenka as a painter, and the character Wayne Danton, as a writer. As an Indonesian modernist novel, therefore it reflects a modernist poetic related to the idea of art. This article tries to figure out the concepts of art in painting as expressed in the novel by focusing on the ideas on painting revealed through the characterization of Olenka as a painter. Sentences, phrases, word, passages indicating ideas related to creative art in painting are quoted as main data, while concept of art, including Budi Darma's view of art, and the phenomenology of experience serve as theoretical framework by which the main data are interpreted. Finding shows that the figure of Olenka as a painter reveal the ideas that creative process of great arts involves bodily experiences of the artist in relation to the object of painting. A true artist is someone who has visions and who keep striving to reveal mystery of life experiences.

**Keywords:** Art, Budi Darma, Olenka, Painting, Phenomenology .

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Background

In the last chapter of the book, BD said something compelling about the origin of the novel. The initial process of writing *Olenka* could be described as instantaneous, an incidental meeting with a woman and three boys in dirty clothes triggering the act of writing that lasted for about three weeks. He describes it as follows:

*After writing a few pages, I thought I would soon finish writing a short story. It turned out I couldn't stop (writing). My brain was invaded by forceful drives to keep writing until much of my time for other things was stolen. Thus, Olenka was completed in less than three weeks, if I am not wrong. [p.241]*

That what happened when he wrote the novel is unconscious, explains his belief that in the act of writing, his status as a writer is more of the object rather than the subject who takes control of when to begin and to stop writing, even what to write. All of his writing begins with a *coincidence*, and coincidences are made significant with other coincidences through this taking the act of writing. Further BD admits that

coincidences, or 'kebetulan-kebetulan' are woven into other coincidences by way of selections, and the selection is based on the impression he has upon them. So impressions of particular objects, events, images, facts or whatever he encountered and experienced in the real world entered and recorded in the memory becomes the origins of his writing and determines the way it proceeds, governing the narrative of the story.

BD often discussed his being an author and things important in writing in interviews and essays. Yet, how his views and belief in the art making process is reflected through his works has rarely been examined. The fact that many BD's fictional characters in many of his stories are writers and artists, such as those in *Olenka*, *NY Talis*, *Radius* and *Penyair Besar, Penyair Kecil* highlights the ideas on the concept of the arts. For this reason, this paper tries to explore how his ideas on arts and its making are also revealed through the characters and the characterization in the novel *Olenka*.

## 1.2 Method

As descriptive-qualitative research, this study relies on interpretative analysis of the data. This literary study belongs to descriptive-qualitative research, and is aimed to describe and interpret phenomena expressed in a literary work. Since the object of study is in the form of written text, the data are in verbal form: sentences, phrases, passage, words that are significant to the topic of research. In this respect, the data can be words, sentences and phrases selected in relation to the structure of the novel such as plot, setting, characterization, point of views, and other elements related to the novel structure. Quotes from the novel significant in the discussion of painting art is analyzed based on its relevance to the theory of the phenomenology of experience that is used as the analytical approach.

The first step in the research is appreciation. It is usually in the first reading of the work that a reader, finds an interesting or significant issue in the work; an issue which triggers the desire and curiosity to do a further study. After a topic is selected, the next step is doing a survey on the secondary data needed in the research, which are essays and articles from journals on the topic related to the object of research. In this step, ideas underlying the thesis of an argument for the interpretation on the related issue begins to build up. The following step is data collection. Passages, sentences, phrases expressing ideas significant for building coherent arguments were collected from the source of the primary data, that is work itself, as well as the source of the secondary data.

The last stage in the research, data analysis, requires the writing of logical and coherent arguments for the thesis question. Since it is textual literary research, the primary data are in the form of passage, sentences and quotes that are significant in the construction character and characterization of *Olenka* as a painter. The data then was interpreted from the theoretical perspective of phenomenology of experience.

The theoretical framework in this research is artistic phenomenology of experience which concerned with the manifestation of an artist's subjective in the works. This approach focusses on the experience of the artist and viewers in relation to art. Artistic phenomenology theory explains how subjective, personal and bodily experience determine the creation and the making meaning of art both on the artis' and the viewer's sides. In *'Embodied Visions: What does it mean to look at a work of*

*Art'* [2012] Siri Hustvedt contents that the dialectical nature of the relations between a work of art and its viewers, readers, and listeners, is basically biological, since the emotional response, the feeling that spectators experience when looking at painting, or readers when reading novels, are part of a bodily process. Engagement with the works of art is inseparable from bodily processes. Art is made possible because humans are endowed with the faculty of self-reflective consciousness that enable them to reflect or muse on their own beings by becoming an object in their eyes.

## 2. Discussion

The character Olenka in this novel is presented from a shifting point of view. First the readers learn everything about Olenka, from what the narrator, that is the main character, Fanton Drummond, (FD) tells and shows about Olenka, such as through direct descriptions, streams of consciousness, and dialogues. Then, by the middle part of the novel, readers learn about Olenka from her own thoughts and stories presented in her letters to Drummond. So, in a combination, this is like seeing the character of Olenka from the outside and the inside.

The initial description of Olenka as painter is in line with the theory of artistic phenomenology. In his essay 'Eye and Mind' Maurice Merleau-Ponty [1964] explores the connection between phenomenology, perception and body which all are part of the subject, as transcendental ground of the unity of the world. It argues that vision is not simply a matter of light received by the eye but it is an engagement with the world, thus a perceiving subject always involves the body in understanding realities. Artists especially painters are capable of showing this process of revealing the nature of vision because paintings reveal the intertwining of what is looked and the looker. Drummond's comment on Olenka's painting which emphasizes on the intertwining of the subject and object clearly suggests this artistic theory.

First Drummond describes Olenka as a painter with a taste, because of her ability to connect herself with her object of painting. FD met Olenka for the first time when she was painting trees fallen upon a bridge, after a night-storm. He admires the object she paints in her painting, and the position of her body when she is painting, as a result her painting is even more stunning:

And as I look at her painting, I admire it more. It's as if I were seeing a storm ravaging, a tree overwhelmed by the storm and falling over the bridge. And the bridge is suffering from the wounds. A simple painting, but implying the whole process of the tree falling down, and the wound the bridge is suffering." [p. 24-25]

Olenka's art is superior to the paintings made by some students who also paint the woods: of trees, bridge, statues, foliage, post guard, etc. The students' paintings are good, provoking admiration from the viewers. Nevertheless, Drummond despises those paintings because he thinks that these students treat objects as an inanimate, as non-living things. They do not treat the object as a combination of object and subject. So,

he does not consider them as real artists, rather as illustrators, *'tukang-gambar.'* If only they paint the way Olenka paints, surely their paintings would have some spirits, joy, sorrow, anger, envy, love and passion. FD gets irritated when, again, he happens to see students making paintings of the fallen trees, but being ignorant of their objects as living beings: "...my heart is angry for the same reason; they treat trees as dead-object" [p. 24]. Drummond's judgment on Olenka's artistic process is in line with Ponty's concepts of art. When viewed, Olenka's painting reveals an 'immersion' of the artist into the object of painting, so that the viewer is able to experience some kind of feelings or emotions such as anger, joy or sorrow. Drummond's as the viewing subject and the object, Olenka painting, are intertwined and becoming one entity since the viewer recognize the traces of consciousness left by the painter in the work.

Ponty also theorizes the concept of the invisible aspect of the world. The physical eye may reveal the objective-outer world, but there is also aspect of the world that remains invisible and cannot be easily perceived. This invisible aspect of the world is necessary to our perception of the world, as it is mediated by our bodily position and experience. He states:

Visible and mobile, my body is a thing among things; it is caught in the fabric of the world, and its cohesion is that of a thing. ...Things are an annex or prolongation of itself; they are incrustated into its flesh, they are part of its full definition; the world is made of the same stuff as the body." [p.163]

This emphasis on the bodily movement and position as an inseparable part of the painter's vision of reality is also in line with Olenka's creative process in painting. The human ability to sense the position, orientation and movement of the bodies and its parts in space. This ability, called as 'proprioception,' is unconscious, taken for granted, and that visual perception cannot be separated from the knowledge of the world obtain through this bodily movement or mobility.[Hustvedt, 2012]

Olenka believes that objects of paint should appear alive, as living objects, in the process of being transferred into art. She examines closely the tree and the bridge she is painting, she is moving around here and there around the object, and she also asks Drummond to act in the same way, to move around the tree and the bridge, in order to help her paints the object easier. The human body moving around the object creates the impression of the object as having the soul, a living object. Olenka explains that to paint well she must observe all movements around the object. If she only observes the still- sole object, the object will be a mere object, without any soul. But if there are other objects moving around, painting will be easier. *'Object should be a process of movement and a process of connecting to everything in its surrounding'* [p. 26] Olenka said it is a big mistake if a painter does not observe the object closely; without mastering the details, a painter will not be able to paint well. Treating the object of a painting as a living being will make it easier for the painter to transfer the object to the canvas. Clearly this reveal Olenka's knowledge of the ability of the body to perceive the "invisibility" in the object.

That act of painting is also a matter of the painter being connected to the object is also shown in Olenka's view regarding her own drawing of the Elberhart Tower. Since she has no prior memory nor historical knowledge about tower when she drew the object. The tower was built by Doctor Elberhart in the memory of his patients who

died of cancer, a doctor who dedicated all his life and time fighting the disease. When Olenka and FD visit the tower, she shyly shows her drawing of the tower. FD is so impressed, it is as if he could feel the movement of the wind, and the birds gliding in the picture. Olenka admits that she drew the picture long before she knew about the tower and its history. Were she to know everything about the tower, the picture would be very different. [p.36].

Phenomenological theory also concerns with the role of the brain processes in creative art, specifically the role of memory and imagination. Referring to Freudian theory of the unconscious, Hustvedt contends that the unconscious is the accumulation of what is learned since a person was born including bodily movements, sensations, emotions, memory which then reappears as conscious through arts. [2016: p. 335]. Olenka is very talented in drawing objects. Like a magician, she draws very fast, in an instant, as if without thinking or contemplating on the object she is painting. She creates pictures of many scenes from the night-club she is working at, and like many of her paintings, they look alive, and demand to be treated as living objects. Just by looking at them at a glance, one can feel the hustle and bustle of the night-club. Yet, Olenka states that when she makes paintings just for fun, the painting are good.

When I paints for fun the results are actually good. May be this is what I would do if I had a studio, Drummond. In the past I had an exhibition in San Francisco. Almost eighty percent of my paintings sell for top prices, Fanton .[p.46]

Despite the Olenka character as a good painter whose talent is outstanding, Budi Darma constructs the character Olenka as a failed artis, in order to suggests another element in artistic producion that determine an artist's greatness, that is vision. Olenka's failure in becoming a 'serious' artist is related to her lack of visionary perception, which is needed in the development and continuity of her art. Budi Darma relates this lacks with the brain issue.

Winfried, who observes her paintings, believes that Olenka has a powerful artistic memory, but lacks insights. Olenka has talent and skills in painting, she can capture an object into a picture at ease. She is also able to memorize details of objects, so that she is be able to paint an image of the object from her memory. Nevertheless, a realistic picture does not challenge spectators to keep looking at and thinking about the painting. It is a weakness that Olenka lacks insight, and this deficiency lies in the network of her brain tissue and cells. Even if she studies art to the point of dying, it will not correct this deficiency. *'Only God can repair my brain'*. [p.171] She said that this element in brain tissue, according to the painter Andrea del Sarto, is the thing that generates the artistic *'incentive.'* When Sarto compares himself to the artist Raphael and Michaelangelo, he states: *Incentives come from the soul's self; The rest avail not.* [p. 171]

Winfried admired Olenka for her 'perfect' paintings. She could sense and capture a 'living motion,' in the paintings, yet Olenka believes that it is precisely in this perfection that her fatal weakness lies. She is so meticulous in recognizing details that she has the power to capture the dimension of motion. She even considers this talent of capturing motion into painting to that of the famous renaissance Italian painter Andre del Sarto. When looking at a Madonna painting, del Sarto said that using a pencil,

he could do anything to what he saw and what he knew. No wonder, the artist Giorgio Vasari names del Sarto as *'The painter without flaws'* Nevertheless, Olenka admits that this skill to create realistic pictures is a weakness because as she believes it, a painting without any insight is not a good art.

Being a serious artist means being able to transform an ordinary or even a disgusting object into a good work of art. Olenka refers to a poem of the sixteenth century metaphysical poet John Donne, *'The Flea'* which successfully transforms a simple and disgusting object, *'the flea'* into a good poem. In becoming a serious painter, she admits she has difficulties in metamorphosing a simple object into a good painting. Olenka agrees with the idea that a good art work shows some sort of transformation of its object, and that there is a regeneration process. However, she finds it hard to give her object a role other than the physical one. Adding other elements/perspective into an object is a hard struggle for an artist:

She also has difficulty giving her object any role other than its role as a physical object. For that reason, the toughest struggle of a painter is to add other elements into the object. It is only then can an object act as a symbol as well as a mystery. Also only then does the person who looks at the painting feel invited to continuously asking questions about the painting, and will not get tired looking at it. The more often one looks at the painting, the more he desires to discern it, because he thinks that his effort to perceive the mystery behind the object in the painting has not given him any satisfaction. A good painting is something that is close and invites people to enter the world of the object, even though no one can enter it. [p. 49]

Olenka finds it difficult to represent her object as other than its physical or the bodily surface, that is the role of the object in painting in presenting a new perspective of looking at the world. She does not have the ability to fulfill the role of an artist in revealing the nature of vision in Ponty's concept of perception.

Due to the lack of this visionary perception, Winifred gave advice to Olenka to Olenka that it was fine if she wanted to continue painting as a hobby. Even if she wanted to be a billboard artist, it was acceptable because one could make a living with his skill and talent : *'Shouldn't someone who has talent as an artisan take advantage of that talent as a means of living?'*. However if Olenka wanted to be an artist, it was better that she gave it up soon before she was *'consumed by illusion'*. Certainly Olenka was aware of this weakness, as she also realized that even though skilled in drawing, she was not always capable of transforming an object into a particular symbol.

Long before she [Winifred] uttered this sentence, I felt it myself. I feel proud because my prediction is in line with her judgment. Nonetheless I decided to keep learning. I will quit only when I see a better opportunity." [p.171]

Finally Olenka gave up her art studies, but kept her passion in painting. She ends up being an art forger, an amateur painter who works as painter for money.

Budi Darma's portrayal of Olenka and her failure to achieve her ambitions as a great artist corresponds to his ideas about the role of artists. In his essay *'Mula-Mula adalah Otak'* or *'In the Beginning is the Brain'*, Budi Darma states that all

great works or art radiates from the brain. Imitating the great works of arts would not make a writer or an artist a true, great writer and artist. In order to be a recognized and accepted as a great artist, one should first “challenge his brain” [p.84] because the source of art is the depth of the mind where knowledge lies. So an aspiring artist should work hard to develop intellectual ability, to enrich the self, to sharpen mind, otherwise he or she would never achieve the status of a great and serious artist through their art works. [p.19]. In the case of *Olenka*, this ‘brain’ issue becomes the main reason for her failure. Brain matters since the creation of art is inseparable from the never-ending human odyssey in finding identity, maturity and truth, and ‘science and art will never stop developing because science and art strive to find and express truth’ [2007: p.59].

### 3. Conclusion.

Budi Darma's concept of art revealed in the novel is in line with theories in phenomenology of experience in art which focussed on the important of the role of the human body in moments of lived experience in the creation of arts. His confession of the writing process of *Olenka* reveals the role of the unconscious in his creative process. This artistic process of writing is similar to *Olenka*'s ways of painting objects skilfully, that she paints like doing magic, suggesting the role of the unconscious in the art. At one point physical bodily movements learned from the time a baby born has been part of the unconscious of human life experience, and a crucial aspect in the experience of looking and understanding. Thus *Olenka*'s painting is good because she manages to project her lived experience in to the object she is presenting in her painting. At another point, the role of the brain in the construction of memory and imagination also explains the significance of the unity of the body and mind the creation of art. A great art that reveals a vision of reality could only be achieved through the active cultivation of the intellect, which resides in the brain. In the novel, *Olenka*'s life is portrayed as bitter and full of struggles, economically and psychologically. This may disenfranchised her from the freedom to follow intellectual pursuit essential for the creation of great arts. Budi Darma's concept of art as revealed through the character *Olenka* clearly reflect artistic phenomenology theory which gives emphasis on the role of the body and brain in art making.

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