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# REREADING MUHAMMAD HAJI SALLEH'S LAND AND LANDSCAPE POETRY THROUGH ECOCRITICAL PERSPECTIVE



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## REREADING MUHAMMAD HAJI SALLEH'S LAND AND LANDSCAPE POETRY THROUGH ECOCRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

NURUL HUDA BINTI ABDUL HAMID



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DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENT FOR  
MASTER OF ARTS  
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FACULTY OF LANGUAGES AND COMMUNICATION  
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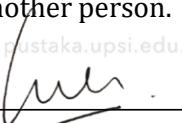
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## ABSTRACT

Eco-images of land and landscape is a conception that showcases the physical environment and the natural world. This study intended to explore how Muhammad Haji Salleh utilizes the concepts of land and landscape as ecocritically functional in his poetry. It is mainly focused to have explore the representations of the interconnectedness between identity and land as embodied in the selected poems of Muhammad Haji Salleh. Ecocriticism is an aspect of literary theory, which has been growing swiftly since the early 1990s that focuses mainly on the study of the relationship between humans and the natural world. Through the theoretical framework of ecocriticism, the researcher has examined and classified nine poems of Muhammad Haji Salleh's collection entitled *Rowing Down Two Rivers* according to the theme and message conveyed. The methodology of analysis consists of three waves referring to the phases in ecocriticism in accordance to the three distinctive objectives of the study. Accordingly, the analysis of the selected poems carried out in three chapters. It reveals Muhammad Haji Salleh's ecocritical perception of the Malaysian landscape are strongly represented in his poetry through three different faces; ecocentric, interconnected, and ecological consciousness. Thus, the results of the research have demonstrated that Muhammad Haji Salleh can be regarded as an ecocritical writer who frequently uses ecological imagery of landscapes and land in his works. This study has brought impacts in creating and spreading public awareness on appreciating and preserving the Mother Earth through the portrayal and careful analysis on the beauty and strength of the natural world. The researcher believes that reading additional poems by Muhammad Haji Salleh and other Malaysian poets might provide even better and more thorough findings for future studies on the topic of the inextricable connection between individual identity and the natural world. Thus, this study shows the implications and potential of developing Malaysian ecocriticism as a means to read poetry and to understand the significance of the land-identity attachment in the psyche of Malaysians.





## MEMBACA SEMULA PUISI TANAH DAN LANDSKAP MUHAMMAD HAJI SALLEH MELALUI PERSPEKTIF EKOKRITIKAL

### ABSTRAK

Gambaran ekologi tanah dan landskap adalah satu konsep yang mempamerkan persekitaran fizikal dan dunia semula jadi. Kajian ini adalah bertujuan bagi meneliti bagaimana Muhammad Haji Salleh mengaplikasikan konsep tanah dan landskap sebagai berfungsi secara ekokritikal dalam puisi-puisinya. Fokus utama kajian ini adalah juga bagi mengkaji hubungan antara identiti dan tanah seperti yang terkandung dalam puisi-puisi Muhammad Haji Salleh. Mula berkembang sejak awal 1990-an, ekokritik adalah teori sastera di mana fokus utamanya ialah pada kajian hubungan antara manusia dan dunia semula jadi. Melalui kerangka teori ekokritik, penyelidik telah meneliti dan mengklasifikasikan sembilan puisi dari koleksi Muhammad Haji Salleh berjudul 'Rowing Down Two Rivers' berdasarkan tema dan mesej yang disampaikan. Metodologi analisis kajian terdiri daripada tiga gelombang merujuk kepada fasa dalam ekokritik selaras dengan tiga objektif khas kajian dan oleh itu, analisis puisi telah ditulis dalam tiga bab. Hasil analisis menguraikan persepsi ekokritik Muhammad Haji Salleh terhadap landskap Malaysia yang banyak terkandung dalam puisinya melalui tiga fasa yang berbeza; ekologi, kebergantungan, dan kesedaran ekosentrik. Justeru, hasil kajian menyimpulkan bahawa Muhammad Haji Salleh dianggap sebagai penulis ekokritik yang sering menggunakan gambaran ekologi mengenai landskap dan tanah dalam karya-karyanya. Hasil dapatan kajian ini telah membawa kesan dalam mewujudkan dan menyebarkan kesedaran kepada masyarakat tentang menghargai dan memelihara Bumi melalui penggambaran dan analisis yang teliti tentang keindahan dan kekuatan alam semula jadi. Penyelidik juga percaya bahawa membaca puisi-puisi lain oleh Muhammad Haji Salleh dan penulis-penulis lain di Malaysia mungkin memberikan penemuan yang lebih baik dan teliti untuk kajian masa depan mengenai topik hubungan antara individu identiti dan dunia semula jadi. Lantaran itu, kajian ini menunjukkan implikasi dan berpotensi dalam mengembangkan fahaman ekokritik sebagai kaedah membaca puisi dan memahami kepentingan hubungan antara identiti dan tanah dalam jiwa rakyat Malaysia.





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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION



Mankind has been living on the surface of the Earth and has been surrounded by nature and the environment throughout their whole life. The dependence on Mother Earth for food, supply of clean water and other resources have started since the beginning of time. Humans are considered to be a part of nature, however the relationship between humans and nature is not well accepted nor understood by everyone. In place of eco-consciousness, humans practice ego- consciousness in which they take natural resources for granted and deal irreversible damage to their environment (Lobler, 2017). Ecocriticism as a branch in literary field serves as a looking glass which enables researcher to study closely the relationship between human and nature through literary pieces (Mishra, 2016: 168-170). James & Morel (2018) in their article stated that ecocriticism, or the “study of human–nature relations in literature, film and other





cultural expressions”, has expanded and grown in terms of popularity and functionality, which places it in the frontlines of current trends in the study of literature in English. James & Morel (2018) also stated that the concept of ecocriticism is to idealize or lament nature that is present and preserved, or lost and destroyed forever.

According to Barry (2020), the fundamental point of Ecocriticism theory is to reject the notion that everything in this world is socially or linguistically constructed. Nature does not grow by following and obeying human laws, and ecocritics believe that nature was never and will never be defeated by humans’ greed and ideas of modernization and globalization. As the saying goes, ‘Let nature take its course’, ecocritics strongly insist that even without the help or interference from humans, nature would be able to survive on its own, which is ironic due to the fact that mankind would



This research has opted for this green lens to study few selected poems by Muhammad Haji Salleh, a Malaysian National Laureate whose works mostly concern on the mutual relationship between humans and the natural world of environment. This multi-award winning National Laureate is a Ph.D. holder and is known nationally and internationally as a poet, critic, translator and editor. Known for his travels and wanders around the world as well, Muhammad Haji Salleh has written numerous poems and anthologies which revolve around the concept of nature, land, and landscapes.



## 1.2 Background Of the Study

This research discusses the well-known works of Muhammad Haji Salleh, a Malaysian National Laureate in the world of Malaysian Literature in English. According to Quayum (2020), a majority of Malaysian literature works revolve around few similar themes such as gender, ethnicity, multiculturalism, nationalism, transnationalism, hybridity, and diaspora. However, despite having different themes, Malaysian literary pieces often contain images of land and landscapes. These authors used nature as imagery, metaphor and at times, allegory to conceal a deeper and much critical meaning and message.

Supporting researcher's point, few examples are discussed here to prove the

common pattern that emerges when it comes to Malaysian Literature. Shirley Lim is a well-known American author who was born in Malaysia. She specialized in writing poetry which includes Malaysia as the main setting in her various literature pieces. One of her famous poems is 'Mother', in which the poem talks about Lim's description and memory of her mother. In the poem, the poet included the elements of nature as imagery and allegory in hiding her true feelings towards her own birth-mother. This can be seen in the stanza below:

*"In her grandfather's garden Extraordinary fruit yearned: Red-blossomed banana, yellow Chemedak. She washed carefully Eggshells to cap the spiky pandan. Leached landscape bruised by sun, He made it magical With edible bushes"*

Another example of the use of land and landscape in Malaysian Literature in English would be a short story entitled "The Blood-Thirsty Vegetables". This short

story is taken from the Book entitled “Malaysian Fables, Folk Tales and Legends”, where it contains stories written by Malaysian authors under Silverfish Malaysian Classics. The tales written inside are the products of the authors who turn their imagination into words in this book, designated their ideas and storyline, thinking and alerting themselves to write and focus on Malay readers and audience as their target. This short story tells a story about a conflict between three vegetables which are Jagong, the maize-plant, Dagun, the liane, and Gadong, the jungle yam. The conflict started when these three vegetables had an argument on which is the most important vegetable that should exist to sustain mankind. The theme of this short story is that selfishness benefits no one. However, the author has done a creative and excellent job in using the elements of nature as the main characters in this story.



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Another great example is the novel entitled ‘The Weight of Our Sky’ by Hanna

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Al-Kaaf. It is a recent novel, published in February 2019. The novel resonates a very clear-cut theme, which is sense of nationality and multiculturalism in Malaysia however, the author mentions this idiom repeatedly throughout the entire novel:

*“Where the earth is stepped on, the sky is held up”*

It is interesting how an idiom that includes the elements of nature is used as the thesis statement of the whole plot which mainly revolves around patriotism and harmony among Malaysians. This shows that nature has co-existed around man, to the extent that mankind could refer to nature for clues and solutions.



Based on these three examples stated above, the researcher concludes that Malaysian literature involves land and landscapes far more than readers have ever noticed. The concept of land and landscapes and elements of nature are very vast and versatile that it could be included in different types of literary works, regardless of genre nor theme.

Furthermore, ecocriticism is the latest branch in literary field which discusses on nature in literature and the relationship between man and the nature that surrounds him. One of the aspects that are being studied on is the way man feels and conducts himself around nature. Slovic (2020) stated that the world is now entering a phase in which eco-consciousness need to be taught as the world is facing planetary crises, ranging from climate change, industrial toxicity, nuclear wars that resulted in plight of refugees, and the hardships caused by the coronavirus pandemic. These issues are worsening and with the lack of any drastic action being taken, these matters should not be taken lightly. Hence, the study of ecocriticism is important in analyzing the relevance of using literary works in spreading nature and environmental awareness to people around the world. Besides, the researcher conducted this study in an effort to support the Green Technology Master Plan of Malaysia in hopes of building a greener nation with eco-friendly citizens by the year of 2030 (Ministry of Energy, Green Technology and Water, 2017).



### 1.3 Statement Of the Problems

The early 1990s have become the period of a specific interdisciplinary theory development, combining implications of literary and ecological concepts, known as ecocriticism. This hypothesis has been conceptualized as a study aimed at criticizing excessive Anglo globalism and English-related saturation in everything, asserting the fact that every human is “a citizen of the world” (Tošić, 2006, p. 48). However, this movement has substantially evolved since then, presenting a number of additional branches within the theoretical framework itself, such as ecofeminism or eco-Marxism among others (Garrard, 2012; Tošić, 2006; Gaard, 2010). Further, Estok (2013) asserts that “while ecocriticism began as an American academic pursuit, it is now a multinational, multi vocal, multicultural area of scholarship” (p. 1). With time, the language issue within this theory has been expanded to a broader context, such as superiority of Eurocentrism over other nations and ethnic groups. This problem has been specifically traceable and acute for Malaysian poets among which Muhammad Haji Salleh takes an exceptional place.

To be precise, he represents the category of green land and landscape labelled as potential area of research via the employment of eco-images in his poetry. Regardless of the fact that Muhammad Haji Salleh has not defined himself belonging to a particular literary movement; the themes he raises in his works are relevant to ecocriticism-based concepts such as the ecological identity, the human-land interconnectedness and ecological consciousness. In his poetry, constructing eco-images of land and landscape has been mainstreamed and centralized. Central to the discussion on Muhammad Haji Salleh’s selected poems is what Raihanah, M. M, Norzalimah Kassim and Ruzy Suliza

Hashim (2013: 61) refer to as “the formation of characteristics in search of identity and land”. They assert that “the search becomes ever more provocative when the spaces of identity are contested by different groups of people including parents, peers and society.” In the context of ecocritical studies, the formation of identity is closely linked to the idea of land and environment. In their recent ecocritical research, Raihanah M. M., Hamoud Yahya Ahmed and Ruzy Suliza Hashim (2014: 137) emphasized on “the symbiotic interconnections between human identity and land” and highlights how ‘land’ is being “ecocritically functional”, focusing on “the effects of land on the mind, body and voice”. In that line, the current study, therefore, is aimed to negotiate the identity-land symbiotic interconnectedness in Muhammad Haji Salleh’s selected poems through the lens of ecocriticism. The reviewed past research on his poetry shows clearly the originality of the current study in taking a fresh ecocritical reading of eco-images of land and landscape in Muhammad Haji Salleh’s selected poems. Such a new method has not been attempted so far in literary academic research in Malaysian Literary Academy.

#### 1.4 Research Objectives

Generally, this research is a genre-focused study. It focuses on scrutinizing the representations of land and landscape as in Haji’s selected poems. Specifically, the study will attempt to:

1. Identify how Muhammad Haji Salleh employs the land and landscape as ecocritically functional in the selected poems.

2. Explore the representations of the interconnectedness between identity and land as embodied in the selected poems of Muhammad Haji Salleh.
3. Classify the eco-images of land and landscape as represented in the selected poems of Muhammad Haji Salleh.

## 1.5 Research Questions

In conjunction with the research objectives stated above, this study will attempt to answer the following questions:

1. How does Muhammad Haji Salleh employ the land and landscape as **Ecocritically functional in the selected poems?**
2. What are the aspects of interconnectedness between identity and land in the selected poems of Muhammad Haji Salleh?
3. How can the eco-images of land and landscape as represented in the selected poems be classified?

## 1.6 Identification Of Research Corpus

This research on selected poems of Muhammad Haji Salleh is conducted by analyzing it through the green lens of ecocriticism. Muhammad Haji Salleh is a poet who writes in two different languages: Malay and English. Our National Laureate believes that his ability to write in both languages is thanks to the dual '*rivers*' that he found flowing



freely inside him. One river symbolizes his talent in writing and producing English poems, while the other river symbolizes his deep love towards his birth land, Malaysia, which enables him to write fine and great-quality Malay poems. *'Rowing Down Two Rivers'* is a book published in 2000 by Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia Publication. It is a collection of 148 Muhammad Haji Salleh's original English poems, along with translation of selected Malay poems. Researcher has chosen the book as the main corpus of this research and after careful consideration and analysis, researcher hand- picked 9 most suitable poems which in total contains 46 stanzas that best illustrates and represents the concept of land and landscapes on par with the research objectives. The title of the selected poems are as follow:

- No More the World
- Welcome Home, Juita
- All along the Way
- Not Mine
- Night Rain
- Shadow Play (i)
- The Forest's Last Day
- This Too is My Earth
- The New Road



## 1.7 Theoretical Framework and Methodology of The Study

In carrying out this research, researcher intended to analyse the selected poems through the green lens of ecocriticism. Mazel (2001) in his book entitled *A Century of Early Ecocriticism*, he summarized that ecocriticism is “the study of literature as if the environment mattered”. Officially named and acknowledged as one of the branches of literary theory in 1978, ecocriticism or environmental approaches in textual analysis however has existed way earlier when scholars commented on natural themes in ancient sacred texts (Slovic, Rangarajan & Sarveswaran, 2022). Ecocriticism is valued greatly as it emphasizes the beauty, aesthetics and the power of nature to people and society around the world.

interrelated concepts in this research which are ecocentrism, interconnectedness and ecological consciousness (EIE). These three concepts derive from eco-critical theory of literature reading which assists readers and researcher to analyse the selected poems of Muhammad Haji Salleh and thus, allowing researcher to draw precise and clear conclusions to this research. White (2018) in his research referred to ecocentrism as valuing nature for nature’s own sake, without any hidden motif and agenda; while Grey, Whyte and Curry (2018) believe that ecocentrism agrees that the ecosphere (Earth’s ecosystems, atmosphere, water and land) as the core which birthed all life and continues as life’s sole source of sustenance. Meanwhile, the concept of interconnectedness here refers to all manner of interaction, relationship and link between man and his natural environment (Berdimuratova & Mukhammadiyarova, 2020). The last concept, which is ecological consciousness to put simply would be the environmental awareness that

mankind needs to adopt for the sake of addressing and avoiding the catastrophe that is threatening the balance and sanctuary of mother Earth. Thus, ecocriticism and the three concepts are selected and would be further discussed in chapter three.

### 1.8 Significance Of the Study

Research on ecocriticism is conducted worldwide, as experts have realized that studying literature on the environment brought upon several benefits, in par with the effort of making this world a better place to live in. According to Mishra (2016: 168-170), ecocritical studies play a notable role in expanding eco-consciousness among its' readers. People who read and analyze literary pieces using the green lens would have

Understanding the concept of eco-consciousness can help control the ego-consciousness that makes mankind feel superior to nature. This feeling of superiority is misleading as nature should not be viewed as subordinate but a co-inhabitant in this world. Hazarika (2021: 1- 7) in a paper entitled Scholarly Publications on Ecocriticism: A Study through the Web of Science stated that every human being has a natural instinct in tracing their 'roots' and be part of the nature and environment. However, due to ego-consciousness, humans tend to overexploit the natural resources provided kindly by Mother Earth. According to Nitzke (2019: 186), "Ecocriticism's goal can provisionally be described as the state of human freedom and flourishing, in which non-human life is fully recognized, no longer violently exploited nor its resources abused or exhausted".

The significance of this study also lies in par with the research objective, which is to support the national agenda in spreading environmental awareness to Malaysians through the concept of land and landscape. By analysing these literary pieces on nature and the environment, it creates public awareness on appreciating and preserving the natural environment before it's too late. Hamoud (2012) in his paper entitled 'An Ecocritical Reading of Selected Poems of Muhammad Haji Salleh' highlighted that an explicit study on nature in literature would broaden the knowledge on environmental awareness and incite the value of eco-consciousness among Malaysians and people all over the world.

### 1.9 Limitation Of the Study

This study is intended to be well-prepared and carefully conducted. However, researcher was aware of its limitations and shortcomings that seem to be unavoidable. The most obvious limitation of this study is that the size of the corpus is rather small. That is, only nine selected poems are to be used in the analysis and, therefore, are not enough to represent the huge number of green poems composed by Muhammad Haji Salleh who is regarded as the national poet of Malaysia. In addition, the scope of the study is rather limited as it focuses on only one Malaysian poet who has his own experience, opinion and views that may influence his employment of eco-images of land and landscape in his poetry. Despite the above-mentioned limitations, the current study is timely because it proposes a new analytical lens for reading Haji's poetry and gives a more in-depth review of the areas of the study. Indeed, it is rather focused than

limited. It can be of great value not just to the reading of Muhammad Haji Salleh's poetry but also to the reading of the man's connection to the planet.

## 1.10 Structure Of the Study

Tentatively, the researcher has organised the current study into seven chapters. In addition to the current chapter of the introduction, chapter two proposes a literature review of the previous academic studies that directly and indirectly deals with the topic of the research and the adapted theories. Chapter two also discusss and interprets the proposed theoretical framework of the research in which the ecocritical perspective of the research is discussed in detail. Chapter three proceeds with the research methodology, focused poetic devices, along with the analysis method. Chapter four contains analysis of the selected poems which answers to the first research objective. Chapter five contains an analysis that discusses the second research objective, while chapter six focusses on the third research objective. Finally, the conclusion, implication, and recommendation of the thesis is provided in chapter seven.

## 1.11 Conclusion

In conclusion, this research focuses on identifying how does Muhammad Haji Salleh integrates the element of land and landscapes as ecocritically functional and to identify the aspects of interconnectedness between identity and land. It is also purposed to



categorized the selected poems based on its main notion. In the next chapter, the researcher provides literature reviews related to the topic of the research.

