

AN ECOCRITICAL READING OF SELECTED WORKS BY POST-INDEPENDENCE MALAYSIAN WRITERS

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an ecocritical reading of works by selected post-independence Malaysian writers namely Shahnnon Ahmad, Kamarul Zaman Ariff and Rehman Rashid. These writers use Malaysia or parts of it as the ecological landscape in their works which are No Harvest but a Thorn (1966), Long Road to Merdeka (2006) and A Malaysian Journey (2006). Despite the works' varied settings, these three share the commonality in how nature is foregrounded and its relationship with human is amplified. Thus this paper aims to place these writings within one of the key movements of ecocritical thought i.e. material ecocriticism whereby both human and non-human co-exist and interconnected with each other via storied matter. The finding of this study thus broadens the scope of environmental consciousness in non-anthropocentric terms in writings which do not originally belong in a nature-writing genre as well as shares the humanistic values pertaining cohabitation of human and non-human.

Keywords ; eco-criticism; storied matter; nature; literature; Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

In a lengthy discussion of major themes and debates on ecocriticism, Greg Garrard in his *Ecocriticism: A New Critical Idiom* asserts that this subject matter is an acknowledged "political mode of analysis" (2004, p. 3). His statement corroborates with Lynn White Jr.'s claim that "ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies" where texts are evaluated in terms of "their usefulness as responses to environmental crisis" (1996, pp. 3-14). But these ground-breaking claims are no longer able to unify the political agenda due to the diversity of recent works in the ecocriticism field. Ecocritical thought has evolved to include not only writings on 'natural environment' which is synchronous with 'the aims of earthcare' but 'social ecocriticism' as well (Buell, 2005, pp. 21-22). Brian Glaser further distinguishes this positive expansion of ecocritical discussion as

writings which go beyond "those bearing directly to environmental crisis" (2012, p. 31). On the same note in their collection of essays titled *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*, Karla Armbruster and Kathleen R. Wallace propose that "an expanded sense of environment" (2001, p. 4) will be able to assist ecocriticism to overcome its conceptual challenge in understanding nature and culture as one entity instead of two. In short all sorts of writing could now be discussed under the opened umbrella of ecocriticism and not confined within the four walls of environmental crisis. Thus ecocriticism is no longer defined by a single agenda or a strict set of values.

Generally, matters related to natural environment has been of interest to literary critics and nature is often used to compare and contrast characters in literary works such as poems, short stories and novels. The temperaments as well as the values of characters as

portrayed in the literary genres are often reflected in the surroundings they are placed in with the aim of helping the reader understand them better¹. With the emergence of ecocritical interest the idea of nature as mere backdrop which supports character development in literary works has undergone a shift and the notion of natural elements as objects has now changed as well. Even though ecocriticism has been slow to be widely accepted initially, the shift is most welcomed in interdisciplinary studies of literary texts.

As one of the pioneers of ecocriticism, Glotfelty in her *Introduction to Ecocriticism Reader* posits that postmodern literary studies “exist in a state of constant flux” (1996, p. xv) where constant remapping and redrawing of boundaries are changing the contour of the field. While race, class and gender were among the ‘hot’ topics in the late twentieth-century literary endeavour, the direction towards looking at literature from ecocritical interest is kept under the radar though “related human disciplines, like history, philosophy, law, sociology, and religion have been “greening” since the 1970’s” (1996, p. xvi). The birth of ecocriticism, an interdisciplinary study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment in the mid-eighties thus marked a significant change in the ecological awareness in environmental crisis. To date, ecological system such as natural water resources and landscapes which are highly affected by the consequences of human actions are currently highlighted in classical literary² works such as Shakespeare³’s plays and Victorian poetry⁴ as well as interdisciplinary environmental research.

Albeit starting as the “study of the relationship between literature and the physical world” (Glotfelty, 1996, p. xviii), ecocriticism has branched further into more than “nature writing” or “green cultural studies”. Following Scott Slovic’s statement, historically, all human beings “have relied upon their relationship with nature in order to exist” (2015, p. 1) and in doing so, nature is constantly exploited and victimized thus perpetuating the term “ecophobia”, a term defined by Simon Estok as “an irrational and groundless hatred of the natural world, as present and subtle in our

daily lives and literature” (2009, p.6) and this is mainly apparent in writings that highlight nature exploitation and industrial development as their major theme. As a result, the first and second wave of ecocriticism are mainly directed on the environmental influence and the sociocultural aspects of it in the texts.

Branching further from previous waves, the third wave includes more on the futuristic aspects with subject matters ranging from neo-bioregionalism, ecofeminism and post-humanism. However, the fourth wave of ecocriticism is considered as a part of postmodernist ecological perspective, in which the focal component of the fourth wave begun with a concept of “trans-corporeality”. The term was first conceptualized and developed by Stacy Alaimo in her books *Material Feminisms* (2008) and then further defined in *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (2010). Alaimo defines trans-corporeality as “all creatures, as embodied beings, are intermeshed with the dynamic, material world, which crosses through them, transforms them, and is transformed by them” (2018, p. 435).

As a huge part of material ecocriticism, this movement focuses on “storied matter” where emphasis is put on how “material processes intersecting with human systems, producing epistemic configurations of life, discourses, texts, and narratives” (Iovino & Oppermann, 2014, p. 21). Accordingly, material ecocriticism advocates the notion “that matter possesses agency” (Iovino & Oppermann, 2012, 77) where matter is redefined to be “indeterminate, constantly forming and reforming in unexpected ways” unlike its original form of “a massive, opaque plenitude” (Coole & Frost, 2010, p. 10). In other words, matter does not only able to produce their own meanings as a part of “material expressions” but also “self-representational, interlocked with human social practices” (Iovino & Oppermann, 2014, p. 28).

In *Posthuman Gallery*, Oppermann defines storied matter as a method for humans to “better understand fragile ecosystems...than the scientific data presented in figures and numbers” (2018, p. 413). This is because, environmental concerns such as air and

water pollutions, industrial development, marine life and biodiversity lost, climate change may not be able to express themselves as humans can and the only, plausible way for humans to understand nature's suffering is by understanding the stories behind them. Alexandra Campbell in her study on archipelagic literature asserts that archipelago in Scottish and Irish poetry does not only signify as "powerful spatial metaphor" that produces "new political relations" but also perceived as "a distinctly material space that has in the past century suffered, and continues to suffer, notable environmental decline" (2018, p. 18). Therefore, material ecocriticism is our attempts to comprehend the stories associated with nature, at the same time, it allows humans to understand its changes and struggles.

Hence this paper extends the "greening" of literature to works from the south-east Asian region by examining two non-fiction works written in English and a Malay novel by post-independence Malaysian writers who chart the effect of development and progress on the different landscapes in selected parts of Malaysia. The selected Malay novel *No Harvest but a Thorn* written by a renowned Malaysian writer, Shahnnon Ahmad (the translated version of *Ranjau Sepanjang Jalan*), depicts the "complex struggle of man against calamities of nature that lay beyond the control of man" (Mohd Yusof Hasan, 1989, p. 48). Shahnnon's view of nature as a beneficent force is very much evident in this novel. Thus, through his work the values and beliefs of a culture that is deeply embedded with nature could be understood. *No Harvest but a Thorn* shows us how nature in the form of land and plants plays a crucial role in the lives of mankind. Hence, Fromm's warning that "land is not merely soil" (2003, p. 5) is clearly reflected by Shahnnon in his novel. In addition to Shahnnon's novel, the non-fiction works chosen are; Kamarul Zaman Ariff's *Long Road to Merdeka* which promises to keep us "in touch with the flora and fauna" (2006, backcover) and Rehman Rashid's *A Malaysian Journey* which is reviewed by *Asia Magazine* as "a touchstone for Malaysians eager to redefine themselves in the country's vastly changed landscape." (2006, backcover).

In regards to these reasons, Iovino and Oppermann reiterate the importance of storied matter where "telling stories and reading the storied world are means of understanding the creative experience that characterizes both humans and nonhuman natures." (2014, p. 30). In an example by Kyle Bladow in his thesis, he contemplates the story behind Pyramid Lake situated in Nevada, USA. According to its legend, the shape of the stone is explained through the tale of "Stone Mother", originated from the indigenous people of the land. Bladow remarks that "the shape of Stone Mother, the direction she faces, and the water before her reinforce the story" (2015, p. 4) which suggests that nature and humans are interrelated to one another; there is no story without humans and vice versa. Thus, the study aims to find out if nature has been given due emphasis in these non-nature works written by these selected Malaysian writers. It also seeks to examine if these works can unveil the changes that the Malaysian landscape has gone through and this notion is related to Lawrence Buell's claim which is, "the nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device" (1995, p. 6), but as a presence, suggesting that human history is implicated in natural history. These selected works will be examined using the ecocriticism perspective as Simon C. Estok believes that this approach "makes connections" and "is committed to changing things" (1999, p. 220-38).

Thus the chosen literary texts *No Harvest but a Thorn* (NHBAT), *Long Road to Merdeka* (LRTM) and *A Malaysian Journey* (AMJ) will be read from the ecocritical window since these texts engage readers with intermingled issues between human and environment. The texts will be approached with a new alertness, giving nature its due recognition with the hope of raising actual and imaginative eco-consciousness among readers. Conversely, this study elucidates inevitable cohabitation between human and nature while determining whether the characters in the novels are victimized by, cared for or explored the different conditions of the natural landscape they lived in.

THE TEXTS

Shahnon Ahmad's *NHBAT* which was published in Malay back in 1966 and translated into English in 1991 has been chosen for this research because of its depiction of a paddy farming community in Banggul Derdap⁵ which relies on the tunes of the landscape and weather; a community ridden by conflicts (with the environment) in their struggle for survival. Shahnon, who is considered to be the most important contemporary prose writer in the Malay language, is very vocal in his views on nature especially in his *Sastera Sebagai Seismograf Kehidupan*⁶ (1993). His Malay novel which is translated into English by Adibah Amin is said to examine the complex struggle of man against the calamities of nature that lay beyond the control of man. Kamarul Zaman Ariff's 2006, *Long Road to Merdeka (LRTM)* tells the story of a friendship between a Malay boy (Omar) and an Indian girl (Ananti) during the troubled period of the Japanese Occupation and in the midst of this relationship, the landscape dominates the plot which enables us to picture the physical as well as cultural milieu of a Malaysia which most have forgotten about.

A Malaysian Journey (AMJ) by Rehman Rashid, on the other hand has been selected because it focuses on the reflections of a man towards the change in the Malaysian landscape since ecocriticism recognizes that the "physical environment can serve not only as the setting of backdrop for imaginative fiction but as a presence in its own right" (Gatta, 2004, p. 618). Published in 2006, Rehman Rashid's semi-autobiography cum travelogue which traces his past, as well as present experiences in small towns across Malaysia does exactly that which is giving nature a "presence". The travels that he makes around Malaysia show us how much the country has developed and what these changes had reaped or wrought. The environment, society, law as well as cultural activities described in this work bring to life the true essence of Malaysia and act as a reminder about the struggles faced by our forefathers. These literary works have been chosen for the research as representative of works which do not fall under nature writing and to be viewed from an ecocritical stance since according to Glotfelty, "nature per se is not

the only focus of ecocritical studies of representation: Other topics include the frontier, animals, cities, specific geographic regions, river, mountains ..." (1996, p. xxiii). Nature in the novel by Shahnon Ahmad and non-fiction works by Rehman Rashid and Kamarul Zaman Ariff does not function as mere background to the events in the novel. It plays such a big role in the works that it sometimes overshadows the human characters.

ANALYSIS OF THE TEXTS

NHBAT – VICTIM OF ANGERED NATURE

As implied by Nur Fatin Syuhada Ahmad Jafni, Wan Roselezam Wan Yahya and Hardev Kaur in their analysis on Tunku Halim's *Dark Demon Rising*, the nature functions as a method to invoke fear and horror to the characters in the work rather than act as inanimate background to the novel's setting. In addition, the writers of the article insinuated that a seemingly demeaning characteristics of nature is seen to "deliver warning messages to the protagonist" (2016, p. 63) for the impending destruction it will cause on the characters in the novel. A similar proposition is also shared with Barbara L. Bolt with her thesis where she argues that "humans' relationship to nature is one of paradox that stems from the very nature of nature itself, and this tension is present in both literary and nonliterary medieval texts" (2015, p. 3). She agrees that there is opposition between the representation of nature in literature. Correspondingly, the negative effect of nature is also evident in one the novels selected for this paper.

Shahnon Ahmad's *NHBAT* is a story of "an inarticulate peasant world of the twentieth century" which is "entirely dependent on the land" (1994, p. v). Shahnon gives us a rare insight into "man's eternal fight for survival against the impersonal forces of Nature" (1994, p. viii). The use of Banggul Derdap, where the novelist himself was born as the setting for his novel enables Shahnon to paint vivid and believable images of "its skies, its rice fields" (1994: vii) and the peasants who live there. The novel is a perfect example of Paul Lindholdt's assertion that, "nature and culture constantly influence and construct each other" (2002, p. 170). Shahnon

emphasizes this inseparable relationship between man and nature through the family of Lahuma. Nature is depicted as something so powerful that it is able to control the lives of Lahuma's family members. It is both their source of life, as well as death and misery:

"Lahuma would not budge from that piece of land; nor would he budge from the fourteen *relongs*⁷ of rice land. Indeed he could not move anywhere. It was all the land he had. Like his newly-independent motherland. There was no other land for him and his. He would live and die in his own motherland. Enemies and disasters would just have to be fought."

(Shahnon, 1991, p.28)

As quoted above, the inseparable relation between the land (nature) and human is comparable to man's abstract ownership of his motherland. Man who is so protective of the land's wellbeing will always be on the alert to fend off any enemy and disaster (natural disaster in this case) that comes their way if the land is under attack. As exemplified by the above quote, Lahuma objects the usage of tractor in clearing his land because he believes this will trigger the anger of the 'spirit of the land'.

Of course the bravery on the human part often ends as suicidal attempt which caused misery to the family that he protects. According to Susan J. Rosowski (2003, p. 116), those who "struggle with the soil" and fail, as in the case of Lahuma and Jeha (two main characters in *NHBAT*), are either ill-prepared as in undercapitalized or physically and temperamentally unsuited to peasant life. Patrick K. Dooley (2002, p. 67) points out Cather's notion in *O Pioneers!* by stating that:

"although "the land, in itself, is desirable," it is "an enigma" (27). But once the key is found and the puzzle solved, the land submits to the human hand that **develops, tames, subdues, orders, masters, controls, and improves** [bold mine] it."

Consequently, Lahuma failed in his bid to 'subdue' nature due to his lack of manpower as well as farming

technology. His hoe and *tajak*⁸ was no match for *Tok Penghulu*⁹'s tractor in clearing and loosening the wet rice-field. Development enables *Tok Penghulu* to clear and loosen the earth of his sixty-*relong* rice fields in two days whereas Lahuma has to slog for more than "a week" (Shahnon, 1991, p. 21) just to clear his fourteen *relongs*. In addition, hoeing and ploughing the fourteen *relongs* would take two to three weeks and that too with the help of Jeha, his wife and two of his children Sanah and Milah (Shahnon, 1991, p. 31). Lahuma's traditional method of farming (lack of development) is a setback for him and eventually costs him his life when he steps onto a *nibong*¹⁰ thorn while clearing his land:

"Sanah rushed up to her and took her hand. They went up close to Lahuma. The earth where he lay was wet with red blood. And the blood flowed into the rice field: Lahuma's blood merged with muddy water of the rice field. And the blood still flowed from the sole of his right foot.

'Nibong!' said a neighbour who was tying something around Lahuma's foot. 'Nibong thorn?'

'Yes,' said Milah who was standing near by."

(Shahnon, 1991, p. 54)

Lahuma is defeated by his own landscape when his foot is pierced by the *nibong* thorn. The incident caused Lahuma's foot to swell and thus prevents him from working his paddy field. Lahuma eventually dies due to lack of medical attention to treat the infection and his wife Jeha has to strive alone working because "the rice field must be planted with rice" so that her children's "hearts would go on beating." (Shahnon, 1991, p. 72) Jeha becomes demented and eventually leaves her seven children to fend and feed themselves (Shahnon, 1991, p. 156). In short, Shahnon's novel which was written in a period when writers and poets were more concerned with issues related to race and nation building, implies that development is necessary for mankind. Mere beauty had failed to feed Lahuma and his family, let alone keep them away from poverty. Thus, Lahuma's family in Shahnon's work fall victim to the powerful yet angered Nature.

LRTM – CUSTODIAN OF DISTURBED NATURE

Kamarul Zaman's narrative *LRTM* shows us how human beings can lead an enriching life if they were to live in harmony with nature. The writer tries to instil a sense of pride amongst his readers towards the place they live in as this would enable them to value the natural world and lead a contented life. Through the people of Sungai Serai village and the strong attachment they possess with nature, Kamarul Zaman in his travelogue paints a very engaging and descriptive portrait of Malaysia during the early twentieth century. The writer believes that the equilibrium between human beings and nature is of utmost importance. Throughout his novel, he demonstrates an appreciation for the splendor and beauty of nature. His vivid descriptions of the Ulu Langat valley, as well as the flora and fauna that can be found there in Chapter 3,

"...the highlands on both sides of the Ulu Langat valley were blessed with undisturbed tropical flora and fauna ... the misty breezes created a conducive environment for a special type of man-modified jungle landscape. ... The big trees were tall shooting straight up to form a dense canopy ...one would often hear the harmonious chorus of insects ... Small jungle fruits grew almost all year round ... Jungle animals that lived on wild fruits and tender leaves prospered easily. With plenty of food to eat, the black gibbons, the shrew-faced squirrels and several monkey species, lived peacefully side-by-side with each group minding its own way of life."

(Kamarul, 2006, p. 34-5)

is so mesmerizing as well as compelling that it makes one yearn to experience it too. But does such a place still exist? The imminent question now would be, does the "mighty river Langat" still retain its "crystal clear waters" (Kamarul, 2006, p. 40) or would it require rehabilitation like the Segget river, Skudai river and Tebrau river in Johor Bahru which are believed to have been polluted by "the discharge of untreated effluents from residential and industrial estates around the rivers"?¹¹ An indication that human takes nature for granted and does not take prevention

measures to preserve it, and destroy picturesque landscape which is visible in *LRTM*. Even Rehman Rashid refers to Sungai Segget as a "rank, stagnant, noisome ditch" that fills "the town centre of Johor Bahru with the aroma of raw sewage and rotting carcasses. At the first sight and smell of the Sungai Segget, it is no longer difficult to imagine the river that must flow through Hell." (2006, p. 195). This river's sorry sight does paint a pitiful but realistic existence if compared to the beautiful picturesque landscape as illustrated in Kamarul Zaman's depiction of the Ulu Langat valley earlier.

The idea that people can co-exist harmoniously with nature is not impossible and this is evident in *LRTM*. During the era in which this novel is set, the people of Sungai Serai village considered nature as part and parcel of their daily routine. Nature was never a major threat and issues such as the uncontrolled use of pesticides, deforestation, acid rain and the emission of greenhouse gas were unheard of. There seemed to be an unspoken rule among the villagers that all forms of life have the right to live. When Ananti catches a silvery fish called *kelah*¹² which is known for its "delicious flesh and edible scales", she drops it back into the river and her companion retorts,

"Why did you do that?"

"So that it will always remember me."

"I don't understand."

"She is pregnant."

"How do you know?"

"I am a girl, *kan*?"

"That's very sweet of you."

He considered it for a moment. "We will not disturb them anymore."

(Kamarul, 2006, p. 148)

This clearly shows that although the "sleek and well muscled" *kelah* fish is delicious, the young girl realizes the importance of letting it go so that the chain of nature is not broken. Similarly, when Latif the shaman tells Halimah that he requires a certain kind of herb to cure her mother, Saunah, he does so with these words, "Don't pull the stem or you will destroy the plants. Just pluck the shoots which are purplish in colour. A

handful will do" (Kamarul, 2006, p. 152). The people of Sungai Serai village, regardless of age, respect nature and realize the importance of living in harmony with nature since "nature in all its forms must be treated with respect, or both humanity and nature will suffer degradation and eventually destruction" (Pickard, 1998). Based on this, it is therefore not surprising that the Sungai Serai villagers lead a very contented and fulfilling life.

To further demonstrate how important nature is to the community of Sungai Serai and areas surrounding it, the focus is now on nature as a source of remedy. Kamarul Zaman gives nature an active role in curing illnesses through Latif, the local shaman who is "known to communicate with the spirits of the wetlands and river deltas" (2006, p. 10). Latif who practices ancient and traditional beliefs, makes use of the earth and its products to produce remedies and rituals for illnesses. For example, when Omar was down with fever after a trip to Sungai Puteh Hill to collect mushrooms with Ananti, Latif cured him with "a bunch of green bracken leaves" and "three tender coconuts" (Kamarul, 2006, p. 2). In another incident, when the brook spirit needed to be appeased before the ploughing season to plant paddy, Latif "made a magic potion from papaya leaves" in order "to obtain its blessings" (Kamarul, 2006, p. 67) so that the brook will not be disturbed. These instances in the novel go on to show that the characters appreciate nature because nature plays an integral part in their life and one has to interact with the environment as "custodian of the environment, working with and respecting it" (George, 2010, p. 31). With that in mind, one can understand why Kamarul Zaman's *LRTM* is so richly laden with references to nature.

AMJ – EXPLORER OF EXPLOITED NATURE

Unlike Kamarul Zaman who rekindles memories of a true Malaysian lifestyle amidst the abundance of flora and fauna, Rehman Rashid's multilayered novel, *AMJ* guides us through a much more modern Malaysia and the complexities it faces. Rehman writes about an independent Malaysia and its growth at the "turn of the millennium" (2006, cover). Based on true characters and settings, his narrative takes us on a personal journey through Malaysia, a country he had

often romanticized about during his years of 'exile'. Rehman acknowledges that:

"There were few greater pleasures than to discover, in a musty old bookstore in London or Madras, some obscure tome that shed some wan imperial light on the longgone people and events that had, to greater or lesser degrees, shaped the land of my birth."
(2006, p. 11)

More noteworthy, perhaps, are Rehman's admissions that during his years as "a wanderer" and "an explorer" in faraway countries, he thought of Malaysia "a great deal" (2006, p. 11) and would "dream of home" (2006, p. 16) often wondering if he should have stayed behind and been part of Malaysia's "turbulent quest for identity" (2006, p. 16) as well as be part of Malaysia's development.

Not wanting to wallow in what had passed, Rehman "purposely" (2006) journeyed around Malaysia to capture the essence of the Malaysian landscape and lifestyle that he had been yearning for. This novel, which was borne out of his reflections, has been specifically selected with the hope of examining the changes in the Malaysian landscape and the problems faced by modern Malaysia due to progressive nation's development. Rehman's detailed account while journeying around Malaysia compels the reader to value and mourn the loss of pristine landscapes as well as idyllic surroundings which have now disappeared in the name of development. His mission to recapture the years that he had lost while staying abroad takes us on a unique tour of parts of the country that we would never have ventured or might not have to witness anymore. His reflections make one wonder if nature or landscape has really been turned into a sacrificial lamb for the benefit of mankind. In Heather Avery's opinion, "whatever the feeling evoked, the outcome remains the same: man sees the landscape either as threatening or as an inviting conquest and is therefore pitted against it" (1988, p. 271). The scientific and technological innovations that we are often in awe of and marvel at as beneficial do come with a price: the exploitation and destruction of nature.

The notion of scientific and technological innovations as one of the root causes of nature destruction is also reflected in the study done by Noorbakhsh Hooti and Amir Ashrafi (2014) in their ecocritical analysis of D.H. Lawrence's *St. Mawr* where they discussed multiple concepts of ecocriticism. In one of the major points, they highlighted *St. Mawr's* main character, Lou Witts as an explorer of nature. She has settled in a ranch in her effort to escape her city life to search for "wild fresh nature" in the "contaminated country" of America (Noorbakhsh & Amir, 2004, p. 34). Yet, despite her attempt, she is unable to find it amidst the raging industrialization. Only when Lou is introduced to *St. Mawr*, a wild horse, she desires the wilderness and rejects the "modern, materialistic lifestyle of the current cultural environment" (Noorbakhsh & Amir, 2004, p. 39) we live now.

According to Vera L. Norwood, "nature and culture are interactive processes" whereby "human culture is affected by the landscape as well as effecting change on it" (Glottfelty, 1996, p. 334). For landscape viewers and artist two hundred years ago, "steep mountains and raging rapid rivers were sublime, verdant pastures, and quiet streams were beautiful or picturesque" (Sayre, 2003, p. 107) and the same feeling is probably the expectation of the explorer in Rehman's travelogue. Nonetheless the sweeping changes in the Malaysian landscape for instance, a barometer of the rapid development that the country has undergone has a flip side – the loss of clean air and greenery. In *AMJ*, the "huge rain trees on either side of the tracks" in Padang Besar had to make way for "an impressive immigration office", leaving in its place "a wide expanse of levelled orange earth, upon which backhoes and bulldozers lumbered hither and yon." (Rehman, 2006, p. 8). The construction of roads and highways in Kangar on the other hand, turns this "quiet place of greensward and tidy shop houses, cooled by a constant breeze bearing the fragrance of *padi*" into a "bustling and sodium-lit" town in which "motorcycles screamed", "articulated lorries coughed and belched and lumbered around corners", "cars yelped and hooted" and "pedestrians leapt for safety" (Rehman, 2006, p. 17). The winds of change that began after independence seem to have blown

away much of the greenery, leaving in its wake, "wide expanses of cleared land" (Rehman, 2006, p. 18). Even the personified (screaming, coughing, belching, lumbering, yelping, hooting) vehicles in the novel show the worsening condition of nature as well as human beings. And the irony of this chaotic polluted condition is guiltily caused by these suffering vehicles themselves.

The challenge therein lies in striking a balance between maintaining landscape and encouraging development. After all, development is necessary for a country to progress and without development man has to undergo a lot of sufferings. Even Rehman, who was "at peace" in Kuala Kubu Baru, a "small town", located in a "verdant and watered" (2006, preface) part of the country expresses disgust over the "decrepit" carriages as well the "slow and interminable" train ride to Kelantan. The lack of development in Ulu Kelantan amazes as well as repels him. He finds it appalling; "so incongruous ... with the level and pace of development so obvious everywhere else in the country" (Rehman, 2006, p. 11). Yet, it is this very same development that irks and saddens him. As Rehman's aircraft flew over Sarawak, he had this to say about the coastline:

"...we flew over many river mouths, all of them spewing out thick brown sludge, spilling the primeval soil of Sarawak into the deep green maw of the South China sea. It was a disturbing sight. Sarawak seemed to be haemorrhaging; arteries burst open, the land bleeding."

(Rehman, 2006, p. 250)

Obviously, development has taken its toll on the landscape of Sarawak as illustrated strongly with the use of such strong adjectives, "haemorrhaging", "burst arteries" and "bleeding", personified condition of deteriorating health. Sarawak's booming economy due to its "oil and gas terminals" (Rehman, 2006, p. 249) as well as timber industry, does so at the expense of its rivers. The "new buildings" and "new roads" (Rehman, 2006, p. 250), which provide much needed basic infrastructure come with a price: depleting forests

and rivers “choked with mud” (Rehman, 2006, p. 250). It is sad that mankind chooses to ignore the fact that rivers were once the cradles of civilization. Their role as a source of food and water, as well as source of transportation seems to have been forgotten by man in his race for development. Rivers which at one time served as lifelines to the communities that lived around them are now playing a diminishing role. Simple joys of life such as swimming, diving and collecting stones have had to be curtailed because the rivers are too polluted. These worsening conditions of Malaysian landscape are observed from the eyes of the explorer who wishes to appreciate its beauty rather than otherwise.

CONCLUSION

The fact that literature connects mankind to real life issues in the environment is hard to deny. Glotfelty reiterates that “ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it” (1996, p. xix) and hence literature does play a part in an immensely complex global system, in which energy, matter, *and ideas* interact” (Glotfelty, 1996, p. 1). Steven Rosendale in his foreword concurs with this opinion. He says that, “literature studies whether directly or indirectly” functions as “society’s conscience” (2002. P. xi). Hence our task, as Buell (1995) puts it “is to put ‘green’ and ‘brown’ landscapes, the landscapes of exurbia and industrialization, in conversation with one another” so that mankind would learn how to re-inhabit and to sustain the earth. This shows that the need for a more humanistic understanding of our relationship with the natural world is required, especially in the present age of environmental destruction and clearly the perfect tool to help balance the readers’ conscience about material development and spiritual contentment is literature.

In brief the ecocritical stance taken on these chosen literary texts, *No Harvest but a Thorn*, *Long Road to Merdeka* and *A Malaysian Journey* have unveiled important issues pertaining to the relationship of

human and nature. Clearly nature has not been used as mere backdrop in these novels. The authors have attempted to educate readers about the natural world, and to instill in them a feeling of pride about the place that they live in. Their texts which touch on nature from different angles and at different time frames show us how Malaysia has transformed from a primarily agricultural economy into a technological and manufacturing economy and thus makes one wonder if the changing landscapes are really in tandem with the development of the nation. Even Buell (1995) concedes that, “the success of all environmentalist efforts finally hinges not on ‘some highly developed technology or some arcane new science’ but on ‘a state of mind’: on attitudes, feelings, images,” and “narratives”. Hence, the ecocritical reading of works which are not meant as nature writing do highlight the constant struggle of human as a victim, custodian and explorer in the exploited natural world and how both strive to survive to live harmoniously and acrimoniously together. With Bolt’s words, “what each tale shows us, however, is that no matter how beautiful or secure a garden, nature, because of its inherent disobedience, can neither be controlled nor contained” (2015, p. 148).

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ The term “nature”, “landscape”, and “natural environment” will be used interchangeably throughout this article. These terms under the realm of ecocriticism relate to the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human (Greg Garrad, 2004)

- 2 Garrad, G. 4 (2004: Ecocriticism)
 - 3 Egan, G. 2006. *Green Shakespeare: From Ecopolitics to Ecocriticism*. London: Routledge. This work by Egan revisits Shakespeare's plays in the light of debates concerning nature.
 - 4 Fletcher, P. 1983. Gardens and Grim Ravines : *The Language of Landscape in Victorian Poetry*. Surrey: Princeton UP. Fletcher highlighted selected Victorian poems which received little attention since they are not primarily concerned with landscape.
 - 5 A paddy farming village situated up north of Malaysia in Sik, Kedah
 - 6 This work is translated into English, *Literature as a Seismograph of Life* by Hawa Abdullah in 1994.
 - 7 A unit of land area. One *relong* in Malaysia equals to 30976 square feet, approximately 2870 square meters
 - 8 A traditional hand-held tool used to plough areas of paddy field which cannot be done by buffaloes
 - 9 Malay term for head of village
 - 10 A species of palm tree or *Nipah*
 - 11 It was reported in the local newspaper, The Star dated 7/7/2006 that these 3 rivers were so polluted and an estimated RM 5bil is needed to rehabilitate and clean them up.
 - 12 A type of carp with large scales (Mahseer)
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