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## **LOVE AND LOSS: THE MALAY RESERVE LAND PREDICAMENT IN MALAY NOVELS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Malay Reserve Land is a topic that has been discussed less since Covid-19 hit the world. It is not just a simple issue about land and property; Malay Reserve Land is also a matter of Malay privilege in Malaysia. As a country with increasing pluralisation, diversification, and practice of liberal economy, sustaining this special right is becoming a challenge. Historically, the practice of land possession in Malay customary law is strongly influenced by Islamic law. According to the teachings of Islam, real ownership belongs to Allah Almighty. However, after the British colonized peninsular Malaysia for nearly 200 years, new land laws were endorsed to deal with the problems in land management that hindered their political and economic interest. Since then, the Malays have faced numerous problems to manage their special land. The following article, based on an in-depth reading of the selected Malays novels, provides the various voices of love negotiating with hate and the feeling of loss. Data from newspapers and academic articles in the last ten years has shown that the main issue is the decreasing size of Malay Reservation Land. The findings of the textual analysis reveal the authors' voices of disenchantment in their novels related to the actual depletion of Malay Reserve Land throughout the 108 year-long journeys.*

**Keywords:** Malay Reserve Land, Malay Literature, novels, Malay socio economy, special right

## INTRODUCTION

This study investigates the current issues regarding Malay Reserve Land (MRL) by looking through the writings in novels titled *Nenek* (2014) by Razali Endun, *Ke Hujung Usia* (2018) by A. Rahman CM, and *Matriark* (2018) by Samsiah Mohd Nor. These novels highlight the same theme, which raises concerns about MRL or other term called the 'red-ink grants'. Interestingly, there may be facts of the reality of the situation voiced out by the three authors as the research data shows the steady decrease of MRL.

MRL is a subject of study in various disciplines, but there is a point of similarity that connects each discipline, which is the problem of land management. In the research by Muhammad Najit Sukemi et. al. (2020), MRL was highlighted from an economic perspective with the argument that MRL was the outcome of British affirmative action since 1913, and was strengthened by the Malaysian Government after the independence of Malaya. The British government introduced the Torrens System, where every registered land title came with ownership, which caused many Malays to lose their land. In order to protect the rights of Malays as the indigenous people of the country, the concept of Malay Reserve Land was introduced in 1913 in the Federated Malay States of Perak, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan, and Pahang. It was then replaced with the Malay Reservation Enactment (MRE) in 1933. This was followed by other Malay states, starting with MRE Kelantan in 1930, MRE Kedah in 1931, MRE Perlis in 1935, MRE Johor in 1936, and MRE Terengganu in 1941. The best example would be the way British confined the Malays into permanent agricultural settlements by creating Malay reservation lands or Malay agriculture settlements (Bashiran Begum Mobarak Ali 2007).

Rohayati Hussin and Rusnadewi Abdul Rashid (2014) looked into the issues of MRL from a legal perspective. The implementation of MRL was to protect land owned by Malays from being sold, leased, or given away to non-Malays. However, there was a hidden agenda, which was to strengthen the British colonial divide and rule policy so that the Malay community remained in the traditional economy, hence why most MRL is located in non-commercial areas (Ahmad Nazri 1985). After independence, various measures were taken by state governments to develop MRL through legislation, for instance through the Land Acquisition Act 1960. However, MRL taken by the government was not substituted with new land of equal value, causing the total area of MRL to decrease. Research by Resali Muda (2009), Mohamed Khairi Termizi and Mazlan Ismail (2018), Muhaymin Hakim Abdullah and Ainur Zaireen Zainuddin (2020) stated that the main factor that caused MRL to stray away from its original goal was in fact the law, which is in favor of the nation's development. Malaysia's economic trend which focuses on the industrial and manufacturing

sectors has changed the landscape of certain areas in various regions and states (Yusniliyana Yusof & Kaliappa Kalirajan 2020). Only three out of 14 states in Malaysia are not involved with MRL. Thus, most of the economic ventures from the 1990s until 2021 involved MRL. To accelerate the growth of the economy towards becoming a fully developed country, Schultz (1961) identified five national priorities, which are: (1) spending on health, (2) on the job training, (3) attaining formal education, (4) adult education programs, and (5) migration for better job opportunities. As a result, the government increased the construction of healthcare facilities, factories, supermarkets, housing areas, educational institutions and new urban areas on MRL. For instance, the Malaysian government plans to develop a private hospital worth RM300 million in a strategic area of MRL at Kampung Sungai Penchala, Kuala Lumpur under the 12<sup>th</sup> Malaysia Plan (Muhammad Yusri Muzamir 2020).

Noor Rosly and Wan Nor Azriyanti et. al (2015) looked into MRL from the perspective of built environment by relating urbanisation and migration as the cause of MRL problems, especially in Kuala Lumpur. As a state with the highest composite development index (CDI) in Malaysia (Yusniliyana Yusof & Kaliappa Kalirajan 2020), the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur recorded the highest migration rate since 1960. Data shows a total of 18,523,632 people or 65.4% of peninsular Malaysia's population have migrated to Kuala Lumpur, Johor Bahru, Penang, and Kuantan since 2000. In 2015, a total of 101,500 people resided in six Kuala Lumpur MRL areas, which are Kampung Baru (45,000), Kampung Dato Keramat (25,000), Gombak (20,000), Kampung Sungai Penchala (5000), Selayang (4000), and Segambut (2500). The frail land inheritance system of many generations coined the term "multi-level ownership," which complicates MRL development in Kuala Lumpur. Consequently, apart from the difficulties of facing landlords, the government and developers are unable to increase the value of MRL, even though the land is strategically located at the centre of urbanised areas. MRL values are four times lower than non-MRL (Buang, 1997). Thus, the value of MRL in rural areas are decidedly worse. Based on the built-environment perspective, Mohanachelvi A/L Gopinathan (2020) conducted research in Segamat, Pontian, and Muar, and agreed that MRL in rural areas experienced poorer conditions. The land is generally small and owned by many owners, and they have no capital to develop MRL in non-commercial areas.

Based on newspaper reports, it can be concluded that the main problem of MRL stems from poor land management, both at state and federal level. On 24 January 2021, *Mingguan Malaysia* revealed that the change of MRL status to non-MRL in Perak, which exceed 614.1 hectares, was due to political interference. MRLs that were originally leased to bumiputera companies were then transferred to non-bumiputera companies, with the land status secretly converted (Fahmi Faiz & Roshihan Annuar Yub 2021). On 16 and 25 August 2019, *Berita Harian Online*

revealed that the decline of MRL in Terengganu was critical, with only 0.003 percent from 15 percent left, even though the state has the highest Malay population in Malaysia. The report also stated that there were irregularities in MRL management, including the role of the state government which turned MRL into commercial land area that can be controlled by non-Malays (Hanneeyzah Bariah Darman 2019). On June 30, 2019, *Bernama* reported that the area of MRL in Johor is 557,518 hectares. It is a challenge to develop land owned by Malay people in Johor without involving foreign capital as the state has become one of the best choices for local and foreign investors to invest in. This can potentially lead to the same consequence as the MRL in Terengganu. On 25 September 2019, Che Wan Badrul Alias shared his thoughts in his *Harian Metro* column in that only the government can help to increase the value of MRL according to market price, and that giving a low value for MRL is unfair for the Malays, such as in the case of the MRL at Kampung Baru in Kuala Lumpur. The land in Kampung Baru was valued at only RM850/ square feet, when the actual market value was RM2000/ square feet. On 11 November 2019, after being pushed by various parties, the government decided to increase the Kampung Baru land value to RM1000/ square feet or RM43.3 million/ he acre. Nonetheless, MRL value is still low compared to non-MRL.

In conclusion, scholars from various disciplines have discussed MRL based on their expertise. However, it is not discussed quite as much in the field of literature. In a rather recent research by Rosnani binti Md Zain (2016) for her Master's thesis, she discussed the social problems among Malay people as portrayed in novels and indirectly related the research issue with MRL development and legislation. Similarly, Mohd Zain Kosnon (2017) in his thesis discussed the reality of economy, politics, and life challenges faced by Malay society, including issues on MRL in Langkawi as mentioned in the novel *Wi & Willian* (1995).

This research was initiated due to the lack of studies revolving around MRL in literature. Although it has been in the spotlight for more than 100 years, MRL issues are still relevant now as there is yet to find a solution to the complicated matters. The main question of this study is how do Malay authors express their feelings about MRL issues? Based on the question, this study has two objectives: to analyze and determine the representations of MRL in these novels, and to connect to the reality of MRL in society.

### **Possession of Land by Malay Pre- and Post- Colonial in Malaysia**

Proto-Malays were the earliest settlers who arrived at peninsular Malaysia in 2000 BC after the Orang Asli (aboriginal people). In contrast to the Orang Asli

who were nomadic hunter-gatherers and isolated themselves in mountainous areas and in jungles, the Proto-Malays were seafaring people who settled mostly in the central and southern regions of Peninsular Malaysia. They mixed with newcomers who migrated to the region as well as traders of various ethnicities such as Siamese, Javanese, Sumatran, Indian, Thai, Arab, and Chinese. Their descendants are described as Deutro-Malay, who are the largest population in Malaysia nowadays (Wan Isa et.al 2011).

History of land possession by Malays can be traced back to the Malay Sultanate era before British's colonization. It is reported that during that era, the Malay rulers or Sultans were the owners of state land which was not owned by anyone (Maxwell 1884). However, the natives could cultivate as much of this land as they needed. According to customary law practiced on the era, the cultivators were bound by the condition that if they utilized the land, one tenth of the produce must be payable to the Sultan. In the event of breach, the land will be reverted to the sultan (Pakhriazad et.al 2010). This means that possession of land was usufructuary. The tenure granted by sultan to possess (not own) the land included the rights to succession, sale, and pledge subject to the conditions mentioned earlier. The Sultan may grant the tenure in perpetuity or temporarily (Pakhriazad et.al 2010). There was little accumulation of land for purposes other than cultivation (Jomo K.S 2015), not to mention for commercial reasons, which only began after British colonization (Nor Fahimah et.al 2017).

The practice of land possession in Malay customary law is strongly influenced by Islamic law. According to the teachings of Islam, real ownership belongs to Allah Almighty. The Holy Quran says: "All that is in the Heavens and on the earth belong to Allah" (al-Nisa' (4): 126), and "To him belongs whatever is in the heavens and on earth" (al-Nahl (16): 52). Man being the vicegerent holds property in trust, of which he is accountable to Him in accordance with the clearly laid down economic philosophy of Islam (Khalid 2002). The Holy Quran says: "And He it is Who has made you vicegerents (to inherit the earth) and has raised some of you by degree above others, so that He might try you by means of what He has bestowed upon you (al-An'am (6): 165). Based on these verses, the system of land ownership as viewed in Islam is founded in the concept of trust.

Land is naturally a universal property around the world. No person can deny the necessity of land in human life. In fact, protection of the right to land implies the protection of basic necessities, e.g. the right to food and shelter. The interest in land is basically founded upon the title or ownership of land. Every person depends upon land for shelter or their livelihood, either directly or indirectly. Therefore, the interest in land is a human right, and every person has natural ownership on land (Shahidul 2015). At the advent of Islam, the concept of land ownership developed in accordance with the teachings of Islam. Muslim scholars

have debated at length the imposition of property rights on land. From a survey of the classical literature, two main examples are often cited as illustrative of acquisition of land: *Iita'* (granted by the ruler) and *ihya al-mawat* (revival of dead land) (Zaydan 1969; al-Khafif 1996). These are the two types of practice that occurred during the Malay Sultanate era.

According to Islamic tradition, the practice of *iqta'* came into existence from the advent of Islam (Syed 1971). *Iqta'* has been classified into three categories: *iqta' tamlik*, *iqta' istighlal*, and *iqta' irfaq*. *Iqta' tamlik* is a grant which is made according to the Holy Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be on him), and becomes a private property with the right of ownership. The Prophet is said to have made *iqta'* to certain individuals (al-Qarshi 1928; al-Mawardi 2006). The Prophet granted land either to reconcile their hearts or for the sake of encouraging the reclamation of land. Following the practice of Prophet Muhammad, the first caliph and second caliph granted land in the same manner, and the grantee was secure in it and none was capable of revoking it. The second category of *iqta'* took place when the State granted the land to certain people upon payment of certain fees. The grantee does not obtain full ownership, but has the right to exploit or utilize the land. In the Islāmic empire of the Caliphate, land was granted to army officials for limited periods in lieu of a regular wage. Land subject to the *iqṭā'* was originally owned by non-Muslims and thus was subject to a special property tax (*kharaj*). While the land remained legally the property of its owner, the *iqṭā'* was a grant of appropriation to a Muslim officer entitling him to collect the *kharāj* from the owner. Out of this, the officer was expected to pay the smaller '*ushr*, on income, but was allowed to keep the balance as his salary.

Uthman, the third Caliph, assigned Crown lands to enhance the revenue of the state. *Sawad* lands and other properties were assigned by Uthman on a rental basis (al-Baladhuri 2013). The last category, *iqta' irfaq* concerns the right to enjoy certain areas or public places such as mosque compounds, public roads, or markets (al-Khafif 1996). In this respect, the State has the right to make grants of unowned lands for public benefit purposes such as farming, building, and agriculture. In addition, these grants can be used to provide a means of reimbursement to individuals whose lands are intended for public use or limited to public utility. At any rate, *iqta'* is an innovation introduced by Islam for the purpose of establishing private ownership of land within certain limits. Thus, in due course, the concept of *hima* (reserved land) developed into *iqta'*, and land became saleable proper.

Another method of land acquisition is *ihya al-mawat*, where unowned and unoccupied land was cultivated, and the cultivator would be entitled to possess it. The legal effect of reclamation or revival of land has been stated in a number of hadith. On this subject the Prophet is reported to have stated "Whoever cultivates

the land and it does not belong to anyone has the most right to it” (al-Bukhari 2000). In many ways, the first acquisition theory implicates labour and its value as the basis of appropriation of wealth and property (Ibn Khaldun 1990). Thus, reclamation or the revival of dead land creates a right of ownership, with the claimant being given a grant.

The practice of Malay customary laws, which was rooted in Islamic teachings as discussed earlier, continued during the invasion of Malacca by the Portuguese in 1511 and the Dutch in 1641. Its abolition only occurred during the British occupation of Peninsular Malaysia (Pakhriazad et.al 2010). Prior to British intervention in the administration of Malay states, some land in Peninsular Malaysia had been acquired by the British East India Company for plantation and agriculture. For this purpose, they imported Indian slaves to cultivate the crops. When the British started governing the Malay states in the 1870s, they massively brought in foreign labor to develop their tin mining and rubber industries. These modern activities were operated by Chinese and Indian immigrants (Mohd 2014). Other than the British, some of these activities were also managed by Chinese merchants who had obtained mineral or agricultural concessions from local rulers (Amarjit 2012). Since then, Peninsular Malaysia has been a heterogenous society. The Malay majority continued their traditional way of economic activities as small- hold paddy planters and fishermen (Mohd 2014).

Unlike the preceding colonial powers, the British colonized peninsular Malaysia for nearly 200 years (Abdul Rahman 2002). They gradually endorsed new land laws to encounter problems in land management, which hindered their political and economic interest. The laws were different in the Straits Settlement, Federated Malay States - FMS (Pahang, Perak, Negeri Sembilan and Selangor) and Unfederated Malay States (Perlis, Kedah, Kelantan, Terengganu and Johor). In the Straits Settlement, the Indian Act XXVI, which was passed in 1861, had abolished Malay customary law with regard to the right to take wasteland in the future (Pakhriazad et.al 2010). In the Federated Malay States, the FMS Land Enactment and the FMS Registration of Titles Enactment was enacted in 1911, whereas the Unfederated Malay States had their respective land laws. Later, the Torrens System which had been used in most of the British colonies was introduced to standardise the land administration in Peninsular Malaysia (Pakhriazad et.al 2010).

Under the Torrens system, the land must be duly registered with the authorities and title certificates would be issued to the owner of the land. Failure in doing so would render the former possession acquired under customary law void (Pakhriazad et.al 2010). A salient condition of the new land laws were injunctions on the peasants to cultivate any land they needed as practiced according to customary law. Cultivation of land without permission from the



state was a violation of the law and property rights. Land which had not been alienated, nor reserved for a public purpose, nor reserved forest, were all considered as State land. Cultivable land had to be acquired by purchase as land had been transformed into a commodity, and land transactions and investment were encouraged by the British (Jomo K.S 2015). The adoption of this system paved the way for the application of the National Land Code in 1965 as a way to standardise the diverse law practiced in the Malay states beforehand (Nor Fahimah et.al 2017).

Before 1913, some Malays had sold their land to other people, including immigrants, due to a variety of factors. The British realised that if this trend continued, Malays would lose their land, their economies would aggravate, and they would live in poverty in their own homeland (Shahrom 2013). Hence, several efforts were made by the British to preserve Malay land; the main effort was the endorsement of the Malay Reservation Law in 1913 in the Federated Malay States. This was followed by the Unfederated Malay States later in 1930 (Asiah et.al 2009). Some researchers perceive that the British had a twofold intention, where besides the above, they also intended to keep Malays in the rural areas (Nik Haslinda 2010) and have them involved in their traditional activities. Conversely, the Chinese and Indian immigrants were involved in the modern sectors as what they were imported for (Abdul Rahman 2002). Above all, both intentions were for the best interests of the British as it provided political stability and security to the British administration in the region (Shahrom 2013).

After Malaysia's independence, the Malay Reservation Enactments were still in force, with several amendments. The FMS Enactment was revised and republished as the FMS Cap 142 in 1935, which applied to the four states plus the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur. The separated enactments for the Unfederated Malay States also underwent amendments, and are still in force in Kelantan (No. 18 of 1930), Kedah (No. 63 of 1931), Perlis (No. 7 of 1353H/1935), Johor (No. 1 of 1936), and Terengganu (No. 17 of 1360H/1941). No similar enactments exist for Penang and Malacca. MRL as stipulated by Article 89 of the Federal Constitution comprises any land in a state which immediately before Merdeka Day was a Malay reservation in accordance with the existing law. The Constitution also grants authority to States in declaring a new land as MRL with specific conditions. Among the conditions are that the land has not been developed or cultivated.

When a land is declared as MRL, it means that the land is reserved for alienation to Malays or to natives of the State in which it lies; a "Malay" includes any person who, under the law of the State in which he is resident, is treated as a Malay for the purposes of the reservation of land (Article 89(6) of the Federal Constitution). Malay as defined by the Federal Constitution is a person who

professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, and conforms to Malay custom (Article 160). However, there are still exceptions for these laws as the State may take the land for development if necessary, as outlined by the Land Acquisition Act 1960 (Act 486) via section 8. If this involves MRL, the State may cease the MRL title with the condition that any other land in that state with a similar character and of area not exceeding the area of that land must be immediately declared as a replacement. Without this, revocation is invalid (Article 89 (3), Federal Constitution).

### ***Matriark: The Reality of Malay Reserve Land in Kampung Baru, Kuala Lumpur?***

Samsiah Mohd Nor, an author known for popular romance novels in the 2000s, came out with a serious novel titled *Matriark* (2018) published by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka. This 400-page novel raises the issue of MRL in the middle of the cosmopolitan city of Kuala Lumpur. The village described by an author is located in the golden triangle area of the city, a Malay settlement that has never been disturbed by outsiders, the condition of the crowded squatters, a land filled with foreign immigrants and Malay vagrants that becomes the object of desire of several corporate giants. Although it does not name the exact location of the MRL in the novel, there are clues that point to Kampung Baru in Kuala Lumpur as the setting for Kampung Sempadan in this novel.

This novel highlights the problem faced by the MRL owners and their struggle to retain their land in a cosmopolitan city. Located in golden triangle Kuala Lumpur, Kampung Sempadan in this novel is a commercial and strategic area. Hence, it attracts the attention of developer to develop luxury condominium which is deemed more suitable with the surrounding of the cosmopolitan city. On the other hand, Kampung Sempadan which resembles the traditional village and its surrounding which become the settlement of poor migrants and homeless people are regarded as an eyesore.

This novel also investigates the form of economic colonization of the Malay community living in the heart of Kuala Lumpur's development. Interestingly, the author featured two opposing Malay groups who wanted to take control of Kampung Sempadan. The first group represented the natives of the village, the homeless, the small businesses group, and the humanitarian mission group known as Richout. The second group is Kompeni Bandar, a real estate company headed by Tan Sri Raisudin and Tan Sri Khadri. Kompeni Bandar claimed that the owners of the houses in Kampung Sempadan were illegally occupying government land. On the residents' side, they claimed that the government and developers were deliberately hindering the land grants process due to high

property values. Without involving other races, the struggle for land appears to show the attitude of Malay capitalists as colonialists towards their own people.

The narrative depicted in the novel can be related to reality. Kampung Baru was opened in 1900 as a Malay agricultural settlement in Kuala Lumpur (Sheikh Ahmad Zaki et. al 2020). After the Malaysian economy shifted to industrial sectors, Kampung Baru was subjected to modern development pressures that impacted the economy, social, political issues, and the local environment. The migration of villagers to Kampung Baru has not ceased since 1900. Its location in the golden triangle of Malaysia's capital also contributes to the presence of immigrants. About 45,000 villagers have lived in Kampung Baru since 2000 (Nor Rasidah Hashim & Naziaty Mohd Yaacob 2011). According to Sharifah Mariam Alhabshi (2010), the 'golden' position of Kampung Baru cannot be enjoyed by the landowners; instead, it gives an advantage to outsiders who can rent and live there at a low rental cost while at the same time having extensive access to the job market in the heart of the capital. This situation is highlighted by the author in her novel. Aisyah's character has several rental houses in Kampung Sempadan, but she is unable to increase the rent because most of the tenants are regular workers.

Abu Bakar Jani, on the other hand, is an example of some of the people outside Kuala Lumpur who migrated to Kampung Sempadan. Working as a garbage collector and aluminum for recycling, Abu Bakar Jani lives under a bridge with his wife and child. However, he feels that his situation still gives him an advantage over returning to the village. This is because there are humanitarian NGOs that bring free food every day. In fact, due to the NGOs concern, Abu Bakar Jani's son and wife are able to enjoy free education and placement at Teratak Aisyah. Indirectly, this demonstrates the reason why there are so many homeless people in the capital.

The MRL issue in Kampung Sempadan is not just related to grants and land-grabbing among Malay capitalists, but also explains the social impact on different layers of the population. Sharifah Mariam Alhabshi (2010) depicts the social environment in Kampung Baru as follows: 'In such areas in (Kampung Baru), rental is relatively cheap and hence, attracts the poor and transient who come from the rural areas to make a living in the city. The deplorable living standard often breeds social problems such as crime, drug addiction, alcoholism and prostitution. Such areas are not regulated by the city authorities particularly due to opposition from the local inhabitants who do not want any infringement to their simple traditional ways of life and most importantly, because such areas do not generate income, less attention is paid to them by city councils.'

The same situation occurs in Kampung Sempadan. The social and physical diseases are highlighted by the author, including the incident of Rykal, a real estate tycoon's son who was the victim of a child pickpocket, Aisyah who from a young age suffered as a hardcore drug addict, Rashidah the rape victim, and Sanusi Jones who died of dengue fever. In fact, Kampung Sempadan is also a place where children abandon their parents to live in squalor in their old age.

Noting that many of MRL issues were not addressed by local authorities and the government, the author deliberately elevated the female side characters, youths, and older men as the 'main fighters' for MRL in her novel. Aisyah, a plus-sized, wheelchair-bound woman in her 40s, leads the fight to defend their land in Kampung Sempadan. For years, she and the landowners tried to get a grant but failed. Aisyah's spirit was also influenced by feelings of compassion for the 20 homeless children she looked after. On the land she inherited, she cared for, fed, and educated these abandoned children to be respectable people. What Aisyah fears is that without a safe haven, these children will continue a life of social ills and crime that their parents and their families lived through.

On the other hand, the real estate company owners are portrayed as greedy Malay characters who are branded the 'zionists of Malaysia' (158). Headed by Tan Sri Raisudin, he looks down on the poor. He is willing to do whatever it takes to clean up the traditional Malay settlements and rid it of homeless people. In his eyes, land is money and progress, even if securing the land in Kampung Sempadan meant having to drive away, destroy the homes of, or kill stubborn residents (336). The author ended the narrative with a happy ending. The MRL in Kampung Sempadan is finally maintained in the hand of the owners by the help of a professional lawyer who successfully proved their rights. The conflict between the two opposing parties also has subsided when remarkable incident occurred. It has touched Tan Sri Raisudin's heart and challenged his perspective on the land and its inhabitants. This ending strongly signifies the author's hope and aspiration towards the retention of MRL to the Malay owner and her concern on the fate of the Malay race. The author gave victory to the residents, especially Aisyah, who finally obtained the land ownership grant with the help of the conscientious younger generation comprising Akasyah Benyamin, Kamilah Kasya, Rykal and Raimi.

### ***Nenek: Dismating the Martermind Behind the Depletion of MRL***

Razali Endun's Novel *Nenek* (Grandmother) won the 2014 Premier Literary Prize (Hadiah Sastera Perdana Malaysia 2014 or HSPM 2014), demonstrating this novel is important in Malaysian literature. According to HSPM 2014 report, this novel explained the reality of aridity of MRL. Apart from losing MRL, the author also make a prediction that the changing Malay political landscape in long term.

It is a symbol of the fading identity of Malay people in modern era (Laporan Akhir Hadiah Sastera Perdana Malaysia 2014). The author presented the theme of the fight for MRL which took place in his own birthplace in Kampung Bertam Malim, Melaka. Although he also elevated female characters such as Mak Som as an on-the-ground fighter similar to the novel *Matriark*, the author did not give victory to the main character. The novel is more of an explanation of how MRL were subtly seized by developers who were hiding behind political power.

For a long time, Malaysia has been known as a multi-ethnicity country with a Malay majority that adopts a peaceful and modern Islamic policy. Part of the Islamic policy is implemented through government projects and plans, which indirectly affects the attitude and actions of the Malays. *Nenek* depicts two conflicting views of the Malays towards abandoned or unused MRL. The first view is that of the conservatives, represented by Hajah Kalsom and Haji Khamis, who believe that MRL is an ancestral heritage and cannot be sold. The second view is presented by Dato'Mahfus, Hajah Kalsom's eldest son, who was convinced that the land should be developed if it was to bring lucrative returns. In fact, MRL can be developed by any company, including non-Malay owned companies. In general, this 232-page novel is driven by these two differences, using elements of Islam as supporting arguments for the characters' actions.

The Malay reserve land sought by Syarikat Padu Menang is 100 hectares of agricultural land belonging to the villagers. The primary owner of the company is a Malaysian Chinese man, Dato' Siew. In general, Malaysian Chinese cannot buy MRL. However, subtle tactics were played by the company's shareholders so that eventually the land was successfully owned by Dato' Siew and his cronies. Mohd Khairi Termizi and Mazlan Ismail (2018) stated that during the 108 years of the Malay Reserve Enactment, the land area has never reached the target of 50 per cent of the total land of Peninsular Malaysia. In fact, its remaining area was only 12 per cent in 2014, the year in which the novel was published. Mahfus's actions in the novel reflects the modus-operandi of the sale of MRL to other races in real life. Mahfus is supported by a political figure named Tan Sri Dahlan, who is a close friend of Dato' Siew. He was urged to build a new housing estate at the site of the MRL in his village. In addition to personal remuneration for Mahfus, the company also provided gifts in the form of umrah flights to the Malay residents who agreed to the sale of land. Umrah was a much-anticipated form of worship for the people, who were mostly farmers. Conversely, Mak Som used the religious argument that the acquisition of land by the developer was invalid according to Islam because it did not have an equivalent agreement between the two parties. Those arguments eventually lost to legislation, which favoured the government through the Land Act.

The findings in Shal (2006) showed that the depletion of MRL is also related to the concept of land hunger, which is the activity of land acquisition by capitalists with the goal of national development. Based on this intention, the government will allow any party with capital to take abandoned MRL, even without the permission of the landowner. Financiers can also choose MRL in urban or rural areas. This has caused some Malay leaders to commit breaches of trust as portrayed through Mahfus's character. On the outside, Mahfus was a Malay who performed prayers and visited the mosque, but another aspect of him showed his actions to be in pursuit of power and property, thus drowning out his Muslim Malay identity. For example, Mahfus used his influence to remove Haji Khamis from the list of mosque committee members as Haji Khamis was a member of an Islamic party that challenged the Mahfus-backed party. Mahfus also agreed to the authorities' detention of residents who objected to the land acquisition plans, including his own mother. In fact, knowing that the Malays in the village could not afford to perform the umrah, Mahfus used it as bait for the Malays to sell their land at a cheaper price.

The author shows the political cunning of the Malaysian Chinese people in permeating and dominating the Malay settlements. Datuk Siew, who did not even have to go down to face the people, managed to take control of 100 hectares of Malay land by using Malay politicians such as Tan Sri Dahlan and Dato' Mahfus. Apart from buying MRL at low prices, Datuk Siew also trapped the Malays with the high sale price of housing units so that the majority of property ownership was Chinese-dominated. The strategy was further complemented by the establishment of Chinese political parties after the influx of Chinese residents equivalent to the Malays in the area. Little by little, the immunity of the local Malay political power waned and disappeared. This was further evidenced by the victory of Mr Chua Ah Lek's election as the MP in the area. Although the Malays were bestowed with a package of Islamic religious privileges and Bumiputera rights, as a result of greed and ignorance, they had lost two main entities: land and power.

The loss of the MRL meant the loss of the rights and privileges of the Malays. The author's anger and frustration toward the political powers that have caused the erosion of Malay supremacy is clearly depicted.

### ***Ke Hujung Usia: The Soft Negotiation of MRL***

Compared to the two previously discussed novels, the novel *Ke Hujung Usia* by A. Rahman C.M shows a good form of negotiation between the government and the owners of MRL. Tuk Aki is the owner of an Islamic studies centre called Pondok Haji Hamid. There are 38 *pondok*, a *surau*, and a vegetable garden on the MRL. The huts or *pondok* are the only traditional huts in Terengganu which have

stood for over 40 years. Tuk Aki struggled to defend the *pondok* to the end of his life as the majority of the *pondok* that traditionally provided education were closed.

On August 16, 2019, the *Berita Harian* newspaper reported that MRL in Terengganu is at a critical stage, where the area is 0.003 percent or less than 100 hectares out of 1.295 million hectares. In a state with a Malay population of 95 percent (Jabatan Perangkaan Negara 2020), this creates various negative perceptions towards the administration of state land. Before the 1970s, Terengganu was one of the states that suffered an economic slowdown due to a lack of natural resources (Pa Ismail 1986). However, things changed when crude oil sources emerged from the South China Sea, resulting in an economic landscape focused on new industries and technologies (Rossidi Usop et.al 2018). An example of an industrial economy that uses a lot of MRL is the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) Mega Project. This was the reason for the complete depletion of MRL in Terengganu.

Hence, various approaches had been taken by the government to persuade MRL owners. Tuk Aki was faced with a problem when the government wanted to take the land where his *pondok* were. He was approached by four District Office officers, Mr. Ruzaimi from the Administration Division, Mr. Ramli from the Land Assessment Division, as well as Mrs. Zaiton and Mrs. Ruzaimi from the Economic Planning Unit. As the reserve land owned by Tuk Aki was strategically located for regional development (18), the state government wanted to acquire the land. When the government representative wanted to see Tuk Aki's land titles, he cooperated amicably. Tuk Aki's land measured 10 acres and had MRL status (27).

Tuk Aki is of the view that only idle reserve land can be acquired by the government for development purposes. To him, his religious *pondok* were there and in place for the benefit of the people. There, he educated youths who were ignorant about religion to become imams and teachers, whereby some of them had been involved in drugs and other social ills. They were educated day and night by Tuk Aki to become useful people (40). Pondok Tuk Aki also provided teachers of Islam and imams who had memorized all 30 chapters of the Quran throughout Terengganu. These are the forms of spiritual development that society needs besides material development. However, this thinking is not in line with the state administration. The land is measured through a lens focused on material development, which depicts land that produces high economic returns for social needs is land that is put to excellent use (Nurliza Mohammed 2009). Through the Land Acquisition Act 1960, the State government reserves the right to acquire any land that could be used for such purposes.

Despite disagreeing with the government's actions, Tuk Aki took a silent approach after receiving a letter of negotiation on land prices. Tuk Aki didn't want to spark a dispute with the government. This was evident when, after a handful of his had a demonstration, he went to meet the Menteri Besar to apologize because he had the utmost respect for the country's leaders. His principles form the basis of his behavior towards the land disputes with the state government.

This is in contrast to the characters of Aisyah (*Matriark*) and Mak Som (*Nenek*), who defend their land with a resolute and firm approach. The two women gave reasonable justification to the government to not seize their inherited land. Conversely, Tuk Aki allowed the land where his huts or *pondok* were to be taken by the government subject to that the government will replace it with the new land. In addition to that, Tuk Aki also put the condition that the land must be gazetted as a Malay reserve land to maintain the Malay reserve land in the state of Terengganu. Tuk Aki is a figure who understands the laws of the land and is even willing to sacrifice for the development of society. The opportunity for Tuk Aki to meet with the Menteri Besar was used to advise the highest-ranking leader in his state.

Tuk Aki also devised a strategy in his negotiations. Prior to giving permission to the land office, Tuk Aki gave a proposal to acquire new land i.e. land that is not in a flooded area, fertile ground for agricultural activities, is in an area with complete infrastructure, and is accessible to the community. This is because Tuk Aki acknowledged that Malay Reserve Land acquired by the government must be replaced with reserve land of the same quality. Finally, at the discretion of Tuk Aki who did not oppose the government, he was given new land of equivalent value. The novel ends with the sudden death of Tuk Aki after securing the replacement land. The author demonstrates his attitude towards heritage land with ever-conflicting development. The way to overcome this is through a gentle negotiation between the landowner and the government.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of the three novels above, it can be concluded that Malay Reserve Land has a high value of privilege to its owners. Although the government offered high compensation, it was rejected by Aisyah (*Matriark*), Mak Som (*Nenek*) and Tuk Aki (*Ke Hujung Usia*). All three characters placed love above all other feelings because land is representative of self-esteem and dignity. Without land, a person is ignoble and akin to a refugee in the land of his birthright. In addition, current data shows that land is also very important for national development. All industrial projects and new technology require land for



manufacturing, housing, schools, hospitals, and modern urbanization sectors. By virtue of laws such as the Land Acquisition Act 1960, the government can own both public and private land for such purposes. Based on an analysis of the novels, it is also found that the landowners did various things to defend their land such as hold demonstrations, use the court system and the law, and negotiate in a tactful and delicate manner. The following explains that the landowners' feeling of love is also combined with hatred and resentment towards the development policies that won the government Malay Reserve Land over the 108 year-long journey.

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