

# Intercultural Dialogue between the Malay-Islamic World and the West: Insights from English Literature and Malay Classical Texts

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## Abstract

This study examines how the Malay-Islamic world is represented in Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim* and the classical Malay text *Hikayat Hang Tuah*. Using postcolonial literary criticism and Said's contrapuntal reading as the main framework, it applies comparative textual analysis to explore how both works construct ideas of heroism, morality, and cultural identity. The analysis reveals contrasting portrayals: *Lord Jim* depicts the Malay world as mysterious and passive, a setting that highlights Western leadership and redemption, while *Hikayat Hang Tuah* presents a cosmopolitan civilisation actively engaged in diplomacy and global interaction long before European colonialism. These findings underscore the tension between colonial and indigenous narratives and point to the importance of rebalancing literary interpretation. The study concludes that contrapuntal reading allows for a more critical understanding of colonial discourse while bringing forward the richness of the Malay-Islamic worldview. Its novelty lies in integrating English literary analysis with classical Malay texts, offering both a contribution to postcolonial scholarship and a model for using literature to foster intercultural dialogue and strengthen Islamic human capacity in an era of globalisation.

**Keywords:** Malay-Islamic World, Postcolonial Criticism, Contrapuntal Reading, Joseph Conrad, Hikayat Hang Tuah, Intercultural Dialogue

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## Introduction

The Malay-Islamic civilisation has a long history marked by the process of Islamisation, the establishment of sultanate governance systems, and the development of classical Malay literature that reflects moral values and cultural identity. Traditional Malay literature functioned not only as entertainment but also as a medium of moral education, identity affirmation, and legitimisation of political authority [1]. Works such as *Sejarah Melayu* and *Hikayat Hang Tuah* depict values of heroism, loyalty, and the principle of *adat bersendi syarak, syarak bersendi Kitabullah* which form the foundation of the Malay worldview.

However, when the Malay world entered the colonial era, its representation in Western, particularly English, literature was often shaped through an orientalist lens. *Orientalism* is the way the West constructs the image of the East as “*the Other*” — exotic, backward, and in need of intervention [2]. This representation is evident in Joseph Conrad’s novel *Lord Jim*, where the Malay Archipelago is portrayed as a mysterious, dangerous, and exotic backdrop for the moral trial of a European protagonist [3]. Such depictions risk reducing the identity and civilisation of the Malay world to mere scenery for a colonial narrative.

Postcolonial literary studies provide opportunities to critically re-read colonial texts and to bring forth counter-narratives from a local perspective. The concept of the third space explains that the interaction between colonial and local cultures creates a hybrid identity that is neither entirely Western nor Eastern [4]. By reading English literary texts alongside classical Malay texts, students can be encouraged to view cross-cultural encounters not merely as acts of domination but as spaces of dialogue [4].

In the context of English language and literature education, strengthening intercultural competence is crucial so that students do not simply accept colonial narratives passively.

Proficiency in English has been found to positively correlate with intercultural communication competence among international students in Malaysia [5]. Similarly, the use of English readers containing local cultural elements helps students broaden their cultural understanding and develop positive intercultural attitudes [6]. In Indonesia, multicultural-based English teaching has been shown to significantly contribute to students’ cultural empathy and critical thinking development [7].

Based on these considerations, this study aims to:

1. Examine the representation of the Malay-Islamic world in Joseph Conrad’s *Lord Jim*,
2. Compare it with the cultural values contained in *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, and
3. Identify points of convergence that may foster equitable intercultural dialogue.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to enriching academic discourse on the Malay civilisation by offering a critical reading of colonial narratives. Furthermore, the study is expected to strengthen Islamic human capacity through decolonial and culturally grounded literary education, in line with the spirit of *decolonizing the curriculum* [8].

The novelty of this research lies in integrating English literary studies with classical Malay texts to construct a space for intercultural dialogue — an approach that remains relatively rare in postcolonial literary studies in Indonesia. The findings are expected to inform the development of a more inclusive and contextually relevant English literature curriculum.

## Literature Review

Studies on the representation of the Malay-Islamic world in English literature frequently employ the frameworks of Orientalism and postcolonial theory. Previous studies explain how the West constructs the “East” as exotic and inferior, shaping the way colonial literature portrays Malay society [2]. This discussion is further expanded through the concept of the third space, which highlights the hybrid identity formed through the encounter between colonial and

local cultures [4]. Another study emphasizes the importance of giving voice to subaltern groups who are often marginalized in colonial narratives [8].

In the context of colonial English literature, Joseph Conrad's works — particularly *Lord Jim* — have been widely analyzed using contrapuntal reading to expose how Eastern societies are framed as moral backdrops for European protagonists [9]. The Malay world in Conrad's fiction reflects the complexities of colonial power relations and European ethnographic perceptins [10]. Similarly, Conrad's fiction embeds representations of the colonial economy that reinforce Western hegemonic discourse in Southeast Asia [11].

On the other hand, classical Malay texts such as *Hikayat Hang Tuah* and *Sejarah Melayu* function as counter-narratives that affirm Malay-Islamic identity, heroism, and cultural legitimacy [12]. Recent pedagogical studies underscore the importance of integrating Hang Tuah's values into character education and literature teaching as a means of fostering cultural awareness and critical thinking [13]. More recent research also addresses the need for balanced cultural representation in English language teaching. Studies have found that Indonesian EFL textbooks include diverse cultural sources but remain biased toward the target culture [14]. A growing trend toward greater inclusivity has been reported, although specific representation of Malay-Islamic culture remains limited [15].

These findings highlight the importance of incorporating classical Malay texts into English literature teaching to foster intercultural dialogue. In the digital and multicultural era, English literature has developed into an interactive landscape that mediates local identities and global cultural flows, creating space for critical intercultural engagement [16]. Consequently, there is a research gap in studies that directly compare the representation of the Malay-Islamic world in colonial English literature with the values and narratives of classical Malay texts, while also connecting these findings to pedagogical implications for teaching English literature in Malay-Islamic contexts. In line with this need, the development of English literature from the Shakespearean era to postmodernism has shifted the focus from Eurocentric, hero-centered narratives toward the exploration of identity, cultural plurality, and the deconstruction of dominant discourses, thus opening space for more critical and inclusive readings [17]. This research therefore responds to this gap by employing a contrapuntal reading of Conrad's *Lord Jim* alongside *Hikayat Hang Tuah* to reveal intercultural dialogues that can enrich English literature pedagogy and foster intercultural competence.

## Research Methodology

### 3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative approach using comparative textual analysis and postcolonial literary criticism. The focus of the research is to examine how the Malay-Islamic world is represented in colonial English literature and how classical Malay texts, such as *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, construct counter-narratives and reinforce cultural identity.

### 3.2 Data Sources

The primary data consist of:

1. Colonial English Literature: *Lord Jim* by Joseph Conrad was selected because it represents Malay society as the backdrop of the story and illustrates the interaction between European characters and the Malay world.
2. Classical Malay Texts: *Hikayat Hang Tuah* was used as a representation of local narratives that contain Malay-Islamic values of heroism, ethics, and worldview.

### 3.3 Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through:

1. Close reading of both the English literary text and the classical Malay text.
2. Thematic identification of motifs such as representation of identity, stereotypes, power relations, and cultural values.
3. Systematic note-taking of key quotations illustrating colonial discourse and local counter-narratives.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using contrapuntal reading [2], which allows colonial texts to be read alongside local narratives to create a dialogic space between the two. Theory of cultural hybridity was applied to identify moments of identity negotiation [4]. The results were then interpreted qualitatively to draw conclusions regarding how the two texts construct representations of the Malay-Islamic world.

### 3.5 Validity and Trustworthiness

To ensure credibility, theoretical triangulation was conducted by integrating Orientalism [2], postcolonial theory [8], and intercultural education studies [14] [15].

## Results

The findings of this study reveal that the two texts — *Lord Jim* and *Hikayat Hang Tuah* — offer sharply contrasting perspectives on the Malay-Islamic world. In *Lord Jim*, the character Jim undergoes an existential crisis following the Patna tragedy. Conrad writes: “*He felt himself cut off from the rest of mankind*” (p. 68) [3], capturing Jim’s profound moral alienation and his sense of isolation. This inward struggle dominates the narrative, with the Malay world reduced to a backdrop for the protagonist’s drama. The representation of Patusan intensifies this effect: it is described as “*remote and almost legendary, with its strange mixture of quietude and violence*” (p. 132) [3]. Such imagery casts the Malay world as a mysterious and stagnant space, awaiting external resolution. This aligns with the colonial paradigm identified by Lutful Arafat and Hossain [9], in which Eastern societies are framed as “passive” and “in need of salvation.” In this construction, local agency is obscured, and the East is positioned as a silent stage for Western moral redemption.

By contrast, *Hikayat Hang Tuah* constructs a narrative in which the Malay world is active, self-assured, and engaged in shaping its own destiny. The episode describing Hang Tuah’s diplomatic mission projects a cosmopolitan image: “*Maka Hang Tuah pun pergilah ia ke Benua Keling, disambut oleh raja dan segala menteri dengan hormat*” (p. 145) [18]. This scene reveals a polity capable of participating confidently in international relations, long before the arrival of Western colonial powers. Unlike Conrad’s portrayal of passivity, this classical Malay text underscores a tradition of agency, diplomacy, and cultural vitality.

Placed side by side, these contrasting depictions highlight two competing visions. *Lord Jim* frames the Malay world through a lens of mystery and dependency, where the central drama lies in the inner turmoil of a European figure. *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, on the other hand, emphasizes a civilisation already embedded in global interaction and cultural exchange. The

Malay world here is not static or peripheral but rather an acknowledged centre of legitimacy and respect.

This comparison demonstrates how colonial and indigenous narratives diverge in constructing meaning. Conrad's text perpetuates a paradigm of subordination, while the Malay epic asserts a worldview grounded in sovereignty and cosmopolitan engagement. Read contrapuntally, these works reveal not only the limits of colonial imagination but also the strength of indigenous narratives in affirming an alternative vision of history and identity.

#### Analysis 1: Representation of Leadership

In *Lord Jim*, leadership is framed through the figure of Jim, who assumes authority in Patusan after defeating Sherif Ali. Conrad notes: "*They called him Tuan Jim and trusted him as no white man was ever trusted*" (p. 211) [3]. The ease with which the local community accepts his leadership suggests a narrative where legitimacy is tied to Western intervention and strength. Jim's rise to power is portrayed almost as a natural progression, reinforcing the colonial discourse that the West possesses an inherent moral and political authority to lead the East. This construction downplays indigenous systems of governance and presents Western figures as the bringers of order and justice, even in contexts where established traditions already exist.

In contrast, *Hikayat Hang Tuah* situates leadership legitimacy firmly within the framework of royal authority and loyalty. The text recounts: "*Maka sembah Hang Tuah, 'Daulat Tuanku, patik ini akan junjung titah Duli Yang Dipertuan'*" (p. 212) [18]. Here, leadership is not seized through force or personal charisma alone, but through unwavering service to the ruler. The declaration of loyalty reflects the Malay tradition in which political authority is deeply rooted in the bond between ruler and subject. This dynamic affirms that power is legitimized through continuity of custom and fidelity to the throne, rather than the imposition of an outsider's authority. By setting these depictions side by side, the contrast becomes clear: Conrad's narrative privileges Western individual achievement, while the Malay text emphasizes a collective structure of governance centered on loyalty and tradition.

#### Analysis 2: Representation of Identity and Morality

Jim's character in *Lord Jim* is defined by a relentless quest for personal redemption. Conrad writes: "*He wanted to lay the ghost of his past*" (p. 189) [3]. The narrative positions Jim's inner struggle as the central moral concern, highlighting the weight of individual conscience and personal honor. This reflects a Western humanist orientation, where the resolution of guilt and the search for authenticity become the hallmarks of identity. The Malay world in the novel, however, is relegated to the backdrop of this inward journey, existing primarily to test and measure the worth of the protagonist's character.

By contrast, *Hikayat Hang Tuah* defines morality in collective rather than individual terms. When Hang Tuah is pitted against Jebat, the text insists: "*Biar mati anak, jangan mati adat*" (p. 320) [18]. This famous statement underscores that personal relationships, even the deepest of friendships, must be subordinated to the survival of *adat* (custom) as the foundation of social order. The prioritization of collective stability over individual emotion reflects the Malay-Islamic principle of *adat bersendi syarak, syarak bersendi Kitabullah* [19], where morality is framed through adherence to both custom and religious law. In this sense, identity is not primarily a matter of personal redemption but of fulfilling one's duty to preserve the continuity of cultural and religious norms.

The juxtaposition of these two texts highlights a striking contrast: in *Lord Jim*, morality is individualized and inward, while in *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, morality is communal and outward, sustaining harmony through the safeguarding of collective values. Together, they expose the tension between Western and Malay-Islamic modes of understanding selfhood and ethics.

### Analysis 3: Representation of Women

In *Lord Jim*, the character of Jewel is depicted primarily as an emotional anchor for Jim, defined by her dependence and vulnerability. Conrad describes: “*She clung to him desperately, as if afraid he would slip away*” (p. 274) [3]. Her role is less about exercising agency than about confirming Jim’s humanity and inner worth. She functions within the narrative as a symbol of affection and loyalty, yet her presence is ultimately subordinated to Jim’s struggle for redemption. The text confines her significance to the private sphere, reflecting a colonial pattern where women, especially from Eastern societies, are portrayed as passive figures tied to emotion and dependency.

In contrast, *Hikayat Hang Tuah* portrays women as capable of asserting political autonomy and influencing the course of events. A striking example appears in the episode of Puteri Gunung Ledang, who openly rejects the Sultan’s marriage proposal: “*Tiada hamba mau bersuami dengan Sultan Melaka*” (p. 276) [18]. This refusal demonstrates her ability to set boundaries and make choices even in the face of royal authority. Far from being passive, the princess exercises her own agency, reminding readers that women in Malay narratives can embody independence, resilience, and political influence. This challenges the colonial stereotype of Eastern women as submissive and highlights a more nuanced representation where women play decisive roles in shaping cultural and political outcomes.

### Analysis 4: Perspective on the Outside World

Conrad’s narrative frames the East as an exotic stage for Western experience. The description of Patusan as “*The place was like an enchanted island*” (p. 130) [3] reinforces this perception. The imagery of enchantment and remoteness situates the Malay world not as an active participant in history but as a timeless and mysterious backdrop. Such framing diminishes the complexity of local cultures, reducing them to a setting designed to heighten the drama of Western characters. The East, in this portrayal, is less a centre of civilisation than an imagined space shaped by European perception and desire.

By contrast, *Hikayat Hang Tuah* situates the Malay world at the centre of vibrant international relations. The text notes: “*Maka banyaklah segala raja-raja di negeri itu menghantar persembahan kepada Sultan Melaka*” (p. 160) [18]. This imagery conveys a polity that commands recognition and respect from other rulers, positioning the Malay Sultanate as a hub of diplomacy, exchange, and cultural prestige. Rather than being peripheral or exotic, the Malay world is presented as a recognised centre of civilisation, engaged with other powers on its own terms. This depiction disrupts the colonial narrative of passivity and affirms the historical agency of the Malay-Islamic tradition in global affairs.

### Synthesis:

Taken together, these analyses reveal that *Lord Jim* and *Hikayat Hang Tuah* articulate two divergent paradigms of the Malay-Islamic world and its interaction with external forces. In Conrad’s novel, the East becomes a moral testing ground for Western redemption, a landscape marked by mystery and subordination. Its people, leaders, and women are portrayed largely in relation to the needs and crises of Western characters. By contrast, *Hikayat Hang Tuah* offers a counter-narrative in which the Malay world emerges as a sovereign and cosmopolitan civilisation, guided by established systems of authority, moral order, and diplomacy, and capable of recognising both men’s and women’s agency in shaping society.

When read contrapuntally, the two texts form a dialogic tension: one shaped by the colonial imagination, the other rooted in the collective worldview of the Malay-Islamic tradition. This tension highlights how literature can both obscure and illuminate cultural identities. More importantly, it invites critical reflection on the power of narrative — how stories told from different perspectives shape perceptions of civilisation, authority, morality, and agency across cultures.

## Conclusion

This study shows that *Lord Jim* and *Hikayat Hang Tuah* present two very different yet equally revealing perspectives on the Malay-Islamic world. A contrapuntal reading of Conrad's novel uncovers a colonial paradigm where the East is imagined as a stage for Western redemption and leadership. In this portrayal, Malay society appears passive, mysterious, and dependent on outside intervention, serving mainly to highlight the crisis and moral journey of a European protagonist. By contrast, *Hikayat Hang Tuah* offers a counter-narrative that depicts the Malay world as active, sovereign, and cosmopolitan, with its own well-established traditions of diplomacy, loyalty, and cultural resilience long before colonial influence.

The analysis focused on four key dimensions — leadership, identity and morality, gender, and worldview. In *Lord Jim*, leadership is tied to Western authority and individual achievement; identity is framed through personal redemption; women are portrayed in limited, supportive roles; and the East is cast as an exotic backdrop. *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, however, grounds leadership in loyalty to the ruler, places morality in the preservation of *adat* and *syarak*, depicts women as capable of political and personal agency, and represents the outside world as a space for diplomacy and mutual recognition. Together, these contrasting portrayals highlight not only different narrative emphases but also deeper cultural values and assumptions embedded in each text.

By placing colonial and local narratives in dialogue, this study contributes to a more balanced understanding of the Malay world within postcolonial literary criticism. It brings indigenous voices to the forefront and challenges colonial frameworks that have long shaped how Southeast Asian societies are perceived. Beyond its literary insights, the study also points to practical implications: integrating classical Malay texts alongside English colonial literature in the classroom can nurture intercultural dialogue, strengthen critical literacy, and help students question the power relations encoded in texts. Such an approach also affirms the Malay-Islamic tradition as a living heritage that continues to shape ideas of identity, morality, and global connection.

Ultimately, contrapuntal reading is not simply about setting two traditions side by side. It creates a space of dialogue where colonial and indigenous perspectives can be critically examined together. This study, therefore, underscores the role of literature as a powerful site of intercultural negotiation — one that can reframe historical encounters and encourage more inclusive approaches to both scholarship and education.

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