

# Literary Novels as Teaching Material: Business Owners' Traits in 'Merantau Ke Deli'

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## Abstract

In Malaysia, literature has become an important component of learning sessions at school, however, there are some views claim that literary learning is less important and does not need to be taught to all students because it does not generate financial benefits and less guarantees job opportunities. Accordingly, this paper attempts to examine literary works that narrate and encourage the lives of businessmen. This study analyzed a written material, specifically the novel *Merantau ke Deli* written by HAMKA. The novel's content was analyzed thoroughly to identify and analyses the role of traders, also examined the characters' physical, mental, and spiritual traits. This study found novel *Merantau ke Deli* successfully portrayed Poniem's character as a businesswoman with three valuable traits: independent, pious and disciplined. These characteristics is visible through the portrayal of Poniem, who can survive in difficult conditions. Poniem's character could bounce back from the hardships until it turned to enjoyment as she faced her life challenges. This novel can be used as a teaching material to develop a high-quality trader's personality.

**Keywords:** Hamka, Teaching Material, Novel, *Merantau ke Deli*, Business.

## Introduction

In Malaysia, literature has become an important component in learning, especially in the Malay language subject, a compulsory subject taught at primary, secondary and tertiary level across different types of schools, from religious, technical, vocational and science schools (Othman and Jamian, 2013). In this regard, the literature components have become one of important aspect in the Malaysia's education system. Over the years, literary works have become students' main reference for learning literature at school.

However, there are arguments that literature is unimportant and should not be taught to all students. There is a misconception that literature elements should only be taught to weak classes, as the field of literature has no economic merit and cannot guarantee high-paying job opportunities (Hong, 2005). This situation causes literature learning to be considered less important, and the public sees that it is unnecessary to teach it to all students.

This situation is evident in the Secondary Education implementation strategy as part of the National Education Policy (2012) which targets to enrol 60 per cent of students in the science and technology stream and only 40 per cent in the literature /art stream.

Implementing this policy indicates that the Malaysian Ministry of Education focuses more on producing science and technology-oriented students in secondary school. Consequently, the focus on literature and arts has declined to give way to the teaching and learning of science and technology.

Based on the current public perception that literature does not bring economic gain and the government policies prioritising science and technology, there is a need to create a more integrated approach to balance between arts/literature and science learning. Based on this suggestion, literary elements could be thoroughly and intensively integrated into learning of different subjects.

Literature is important in students' self-development as it can shape their thinking (Rokimin, 2006). Elements of literature can be used to cultivate noble personalities among students (Abdul Aziz, 1998). This reflects that literature is not an empty, meaningless subject. Many literary works have highlighted human values and exemplify noble morals for students (Lubis and Azman, 2021). Furthermore, studying literature can help develop students' critical thinking skills creativity, including in science and technology learning (Collins et al., 2023).

In the field of business and trade, literature can be used as a medium to improve students' understanding, appreciation and application of good business practices, help others and stay away from discrimination in business practices (Watson, 2003). Literary works like novels, often highlight noble values and good morals for traders and buyers as lessons for readers (Randall and Martin, 2003). One of the literary works highlighting moral values and noble practices of the business world is a novel titled *Merantau Ke Deli*, written by HAMKA.

### **Methodology**

This study analysed a written material, specifically the novel *Merantau ke Deli* (Hamka, 2010). The novel's content was analysed thoroughly to identify and analyse the role of traders in the story. This study examined the characters' physical, mental, and spiritual traits and determined each character's superiority. The study also analysed the story's background to determine the authenticity in the portrayal of traders in this story (Omar, 1992).

### **Analysis and Discussion**

A good novelist must be able to present a clear and true vision. It is necessary for novelists to feature noble elements and values to educate the public about good business practices and morality in business transactions. *Merantau Ke Deli*, written by HAMKA, tells the story and struggles of a woman named Poniem in transforming her life from being deprived to becoming a successful trader and business woman, despite repeated failures. She eventually tasted success and successfully improved her life due to her determination to apply good business practices.

Poniem faced a lot of heavy trials in her life. The story started when she was deceived by the lure of a lucrative job offer in a place called a Deli. Subsequently, Poniem ended working as manual labourer and even worst, with a beautiful face, Poniem was forced to become a mistress of one of the richest 'tauke' (businessman) Deli. The tauke took care of Poniem and even paid for all of her expenses. From that moment on, Poniem started living a despicable, deprived life. Despite living in luxury under the care of Deli's biggest tauke, Poniem felt absolutely disinclined and unsatisfied with her life as a mistress. Poniem wanted freedom and to repent herself to be better so that she can live like other women. Furthermore, she wanted a legal husband in Islam.

Consequently, Poniem met Leman, a trader in Deli. He was attracted to Poniem's beauty and wanted to marry her. Leman was aware of Poniem's position as a mistress, however, after getting Poniem's consent, Leman and Poniem to become husband and wife, Poniem and Leman left Deli and travelled to Medan, North Sumatra, Indonesia where they were legally married under the Islamic law.

In Medan, Poniem and Leman started a new life where they planned to start their own family. They also opened a small business there. Due to their determination and perseverance, their small business grew and become very successful. Poniem was living happily with Leman and had a thriving business in Medan. In this light, Poniem has managed to change herself for the better in Medan. However, not long after that, Poniem was tested again in her family life. Leman married another woman named Mariatun at the insistence of the Leman family because Leman still had no children after marrying Poniem. Poniem accepted Leman's second marriage with Mariatun and the presence of another woman in their marriage.

However, after Leman's marriage to Mariatun, Leman's and Poniem's marriage became miserable and distressing due to the presence of a third person in their family. To solve his marital problems, Leman hastily divorced Poniem with triple talaq, and Poniem was tested again. After the divorce between Leman and Poniem, the business legacy they built faced losses until it became bankrupt.

To sustain her life, Poniem tried to run a cloth trading business with a labourer named Suyono, who previously worked in Poniem and Leman's business. Poniem and Suyono's business subsequently thrived due to their hard work and perseverance and soon, the business turned into a medium-sized business. With revenues from the business, Poniem and Suyono managed to buy a plot of land to build a large house. Poniem married Suyono and the novel ended by depicting them as a family.

An interesting motivation and research contribution in this study is the Novel Merantau Ke Deli provides a deeper understanding and enrich knowledge about the religious and cultural context of Muslim business owners in Indonesia. It gives an initial overview of the culture, way of life and relationship between two different ethnicities in Indonesia, namely the Minangkabau and Javanese ethnicities. It also offers an opportunity to comprehend Hamka's thoughts and perspectives on the values of Islam which is should be practiced by businesses owner, especially Muslim. Through this novel, the values highlighted by Hamka can be understood and appreciated by readers, especially from youth to adults. These values are universal and closely related to ordinary human life. In the novel, there are elements of pleasure, hardship, pain and persistence that can shake and play with the reader's emotions.

### **Independent, Pious and Disciplined Traits of Business Owners**

In the novel Merantau ke Deli, Poniem was portrayed as an independent woman. At the beginning, Poniem was a mistress of the richest tauke in Deli. Subsequently she was met Leman who was infatuated with her. Leman saved Poniem from a despicable life by agreeing to marry her. They escaped to Medan where they were married under Islamic law and started a new life.

After some time, the marital relationship between Poniem and Leman encountered a big hurdle. Leman took a second wife and not long after that, he divorced Poniem, forcing Poniem to rebuild her life alone. Undeterred, Poniem started her own business and after being a divorcee for a long time, Poniem married her shop assistant, Suyono.

This element of independence was evident when the business of Poniem's first husband, Leman, was in a very bad state and its working capital was depleting over time. In that situation, Poniem pawned all her jewellery for funds to expand their business. This was the starting point for Poniem to get involved in the business and stopped being a housewife. Together, Poniem and Leman built their business and expanded it until it became big and successful and was trusted by other merchants. Their business success is expressed as follows:

"Their shop, which was once small, is now big, there are already many big merchants in Medan who like to sell goods to them, and many customers who come to buy the goods from them. They had many young workers working day and night to operate their business. Poniem sits facing the collection box while Leman entertains the customers."

Poniem lived alone after her divorced from Leman. During this time, Poniem did not despair as she was convinced of the power of Allah SWT and the strength Allah had bestowed upon her. This is evident through Poniem's determination, described by the author:

"She repented and knows that she only has two places to go to, first, to Allah whose door is always open, second, the strength that God has bestowed upon her. So, her redemption becomes her drive and will to keep on living."

This determination reflects that Poniem is a self-sufficient, independent character. Not just relying on sheer determination, Poniem continued to strive for her life by opening her own business. Just as Poniem helped expand Leman's business before, at this time, Poniem also pawned all the gold she owned to get initial capital for her new business. She did all to become independent, survive and have a better standard of living.

In contrast to before, Poniem's new business was more challenging. Previously Poniem operated her business in a rented shop, but Poniem had to be more independent and persistent because she needed to sell her goods with a bicycle. All these challenges are described in the novel:

"Poniem's gold jewelry was returned to the pawn shop as before. When she had to take the jewelry from her chest, she said in her heart: "this is the second time I take off my jewelry from my chest. Hopefully, it can bring it home again while get many more....". Early in the morning, Poniem sold glutinous rice and mixed rice. She also sold some in the noon and evening."

While working on her business, Poniem married her second husband, Suyono. Despite being married, Poniem kept doing her business so that she can redeem the pawned jewellery. With the business, Poniem wanted to raise money to buy another property. After a long period, Poniem finally bought a piece of land and a house, paid in instalments, for her to live with her husband and adopted son in Deli. "The day of the move has been set. Poniem will come to the house she bought with her own sweat and blood... "

Merantau Ke Deli also portrayed the importance of worship and religion in the life of a trader. The author of the novel highlighted this aspect through Poniem's characteristics. The role of faith and worship is evident from the marriage between Poniem and Leman. After the marriage, Poniem and Leman could live as a legitimate husband and wife under Islamic law, whereas before that, Poniem lived as a mistress to the great tauke in Deli. Poniem's life was full of sin which had swayed Poniem further from the practice of worship.

The marriage between Poniem and Leman was carried out as the demands of Islam. This can be seen in the marriage procedure, which adheres to all Islamic rules, conditions and practices. In regard to her intention, Poniem married Leman to change to a better life. The author described the blessing from the marriage as Poniem gained happiness as a wife. Poniem's marriage to Leman was depicted in the novel with the following description: "They

left for Medan on that very day, and to the house of the head kadi. They were legally married, Islamically."

After marrying Leman and becoming Leman's legitimate wife in Islam, Poniem became more pious and performed more acts worship every day. As a righteous wife, Poniem served her whole life to her husband. While serving her husband, Leman, Poniem always hoped for pleasure from Allah SWT and did not expect any return from Leman.

This is reflected in the description of Poniem's daily life with Leman. The author highlighted Poniem's sincerity through her sacrifices in helping her husband expands his business. Poniem handed over all her jewellery to help fund Leman's business expansion. This caused Poniem to lose all of her jewellery, and had no jewellery to wear.

In addition to handing over her jewellery to Leman, Poniem struggled alongside her husband to expand the business. Poniem also equated her sincerity, devotion and self-sacrifice to her husband as an act of worship. Thus, she never resisted or objected her husband's instructions and demands.

Poniem's devotion to her husband and perseverance to help him are described by the author as follows

"Abang..! We must expand our business.. We need to sell these to the gold merchants to make money. With the money we can buy more products to sell and fix our business. Take my jewellery and use it just like it is yours, just as myself is yours too."

In addition, the novel portrayed Poniem as a businesswoman with high discipline, which is a valuable trait for someone in business. Such discipline was highlighted through Poniem's manner when conducting business transactions, first, with Leman, and subsequently, with Suyono. Poniem was portrayed as someone who is highly disciplined, especially when dealing with money and cash transactions.

As a businesswoman, Poniem managed her finances well. Starting from little, she was able to save and accumulated a lot of money. As her business expanded, she still kept her discipline in managing money. This discipline is evident when she was managing her business with Leman and later, with Suyono.

In this light, Poniem always separated her personal from her business finances. She reserved the money for business and would not use it for other purposes. Although Poniem's life is very difficult, she never used the money reserved for business to ensure her business operation would not be disrupted and the business would continue to thrive. She also used to same principle for her goods. Although Poniem is the business owner, she never took any goods without paying the cost back to her business.

Another instance of Poniem's discipline in the novel *Merantau Ke Deli*, is when Poniem intended to expand her business. As a large capital was needed for the expansion, Poniem continued to be mindful and disciplined when managing the business. Poniem pawned her jewellery once again to earn some fund as capital, as shown below:

""Abang..! We must expand our business... We need to sell these to the gold merchants to make money. With the money we can buy more products to sell and fix our business. Take my jewellery and use it as it is yours, just as myself is yours too."

Even after getting additional capital, she still managed the business with high discipline, and Poniem managed to grow the business. Even though Poniem had many employees who helped sell her goods everywhere, at the same time, Poniem did not sit quietly and leaving the store managed by her employees, rather, she became a disciplined store manager. Her determination has led to her business expanding over the years.

On the other hand, the novel also portrayed the result of a lack of discipline in managing the business, which resulted the collapse of Leman and Poniem's business after he married his second wife. Eventually, the business went bankrupt and closed down. Poniem as a disciplined person, investigated the cause because she something was not right. Therefore, for the interest of their business Poniem and Leman investigated the matter, as shown below,

"I don't believe why it happened. What is the reason for the payment to not be received in full, and the rent is not paid, if it is indeed the high expenses, the store is always full. We need to examine this matter carefully..... start calculating carefully. They started at seven o'clock in the evening and it was not done until one o'clock in the morning. It was found that sales records were accurate, receipts of receivables were regular, and there was no fraud. The only thing that explains the shortage of fun is Leman's erratic behaviour in spending money and spend how much he likes."

Leman's lack of discipline and careless in spending money has caused their business became unmanageable and eventually went bankrupt.

Poniem also played the role of a disciplined businesswoman when she was starting a new business with Suyono, n. As a businesswoman who wanted to start a business, Poniem was willing to pawn her jewellery to a pawnshop again to get business capital. Poniem did not have any financial resources other than pawning her jewellery. She used the money from the jewellery to start her new business. This situation was described in the novel as follows:

"Poniem's gold jewelry was returned to the pawn shop as before. When she had to take the jewelry from her chest, she said in her heart: "this is the second time I take off my jewelry from my chest. Hopefully, it can bring it home again while get many more...."

Poniem's willingness to pawn all her jewelry twice is an indication that she understood and practised the discipline of business people, and after that, Poniem managed her business as best he could with Suyono. As novice business owners, Poniem realised they needed to be thrifty, so the business could continue growing. Poniem is not just thrifty but cautious in spending money; even for everyday food.

Poniem's discipline was described in the novel as follows

" ..... So both of them are equally thrifty and meticulous to the point that sometimes they are regarded as stingy. They do not feel awkward if they eat only twice a day, spending three cents in the morning, and three cents in the evening....."

## **Conclusion**

The researchers opines that the novel successfully portrayed Poniem's character as a businesswoman with three valuable traits: independent, pious and disciplined. The characteristic of a self-sufficient, independent trader is visible through the portrayal of Poniem, who can survive in difficult conditions. Poniem's character could bounce back from the hardships until it turned to enjoyment as she faced her life challenges. She dedicated her energy and pawned her jewellery to help expand her former husband's business, without expecting anything for return. Furthermore, Poniem was portrayed as someone pious and conduct the business as an act of worship to Allah. The author successfully highlighted this element through Poniem's character, who sought to change her whole life, from a despicable life filled with vices to one who obeys Allah's commandments, and always performing acts of worship. In this regard, acts of worship are not confined to prayers and reading the Quran, but also working for a living and studying. In regard to the value of discipline, Poniem's

consistent discipline has helped her business to become more profitable day by day. Subsequently, her business was able to grow further and she was able to redeem her jewellery from the pawn Poniem was also able to buy her own piece of land and build a house there. Poniem's story is a testament of how determination and discipline could lead to success in business. In this light, success will only be gained when the business is conducted with full discipline. Thus, a business will not be profitable when there is a lack of discipline and careless management, rather it will meet with failure and suffer losses easily.

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