

Flora and Fauna Elements in Artworks Inspired by Malay Proverbs

Nur Fatiha Aziera Ain Mohd Khime^{1*}, Nurul Huda Mohd Din², Mohd Suhaimi Tohid³

^{1,2,3}*Faculty of Art and Design, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia*

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 04 May 2026

Revised 05 May 2026

Accepted 23 June 2026

Online first

Published 30 June 2026

Keywords:

Cultural values

Flora and Fauna

Malay proverbs

Terry Barrett

Visual analysis.

DOI:

10.24191/ijad.v10i1.5ayyx520

ABSTRACT

The use of Malay proverbs has long been a medium for conveying wisdom, values, and life lessons in Malay culture. In the field of visual arts, proverbs are often adapted into artworks as symbolic representations that reflect cultural identity and philosophy. This study aims to identify the elements of flora and fauna in artworks inspired by Malay proverbs, categorize artists who incorporate these elements into proverb-based artworks, and analyse their meanings and values. The focus is on two selected printmaking works namely “*Katak Hendak Jadi Lembu*” by Juhari Said and “*Tak Tumbuh Tak Melata*” by A. Rahman Mohamed. The methodology employed is a qualitative visual analysis guided by Terry Barrett’s art criticism approach, examining aspects of form, technique, composition, and symbolism. The findings reveal that flora and fauna motifs not only serve as visual decorations but also function as cultural metaphors that represent human life, nature, and social values embedded in Malay society. These results highlight the role of proverbs as a source of inspiration in contemporary art practices while maintaining their cultural significance. In conclusion, this study suggests that future research may further explore the integration of traditional wisdom into modern artistic expressions, thus enriching the understanding of Malay visual culture in a global context.

1. INTRODUCTION

Visual arts are a medium for expressing culture, values, and beliefs in society. It is where natural elements such as flora and fauna are often used in Malaysian art as symbols with unique meanings. These natural elements not only strengthen the artwork but can also reflect cultural beliefs passed down from generation to generation. Malay proverbs often exemplify cultural and moral values through metaphors of nature, especially flora and fauna. Balazs Huszka et al. (2025), highlights how images of flora and fauna serve as a cognitive tool to express abstract ideas like harmony and balance in nature, in addition to being just ornamental.

In a more specific context, a study on the use of Malay fauna such as fish and poultry in Sambas proverbs by Chairil Effendy et al. (2022) shows the use of this fauna as a moral reference to patience and humility. While animal or fauna symbols, especially birds, are used as symbols of freedom and communication in Malay society (Wan Norasikin et al., 2016). Ultimately, the literature demonstrates that the use of flora and fauna components derived from Malay proverbs into visual arts not only strengthens cultural heritage but also unites tradition and modern artistic expression.

^{2*} Corresponding author. E-mail address: fatihakhime99@gmail.com

For example, the adaptation of Malay proverbs into sculptures and paintings not only preserves traditional wisdom but also provides a contemporary platform for interpretation (Muhammad Zaidi, 2017).

Malay proverbs, which represent personal beliefs and life philosophies, successfully convey cultural values in Malay society. Similarly, in the statement of Wan Norasikin et al. (2016) observe how animals frequently serve as metaphors for human characteristics and society ideals in Malay proverbs. By illustrating animal behavior, these phrases effectively convey moral lessons and regulate behaviour in the community. Sourced from life experience and observation from the surrounding environment, animal symbolism is often used in society to represent an event, value in life, and meaning in communication (Mohd Nafis et al., 2022). In daily contexts, like Malaysian society, the employment of animal symbols, like frogs, is frequently accompanied with proverbs that suggest both positive and bad outcomes. Combining aspects of flora and wildlife with Malay proverbs in artwork creates a unique visual expression that is deeply rooted in Malay tradition.

Malay proverb-inspired artwork frequently incorporates visual elements with purposes beyond aesthetics. They act as a conduit for cross-cultural dialogue. Each element of flora and fauna in the artwork carries its meaning, which is related to the values and beliefs of the Malay community. According to Zaitul Azma and Ahmad Fuad (2011), Malay proverbs define the former Malay community's beliefs in their day-to-day lives. Also, Malay proverbs exist from the experience and wisdom of the previous community, which better understood nature and their daily lives.

This study aims to identify flora and fauna elements in artworks inspired by Malay proverbs. In addition, categorizing artists who incorporate elements of flora and fauna into artworks adapted from Malay proverbs and analyzing flora and fauna elements in artworks adapted from Malay proverbs relates to the meaning and value. With that, the objective of this study can also help in understanding how the values and philosophies in Malay proverbs can be translated into visual form. As a result, it can create opportunities to appreciate the diversity of local art and the depth of cultural history. It is believed that this study would preserve the local visual art legacy's distinctiveness while advancing a wider knowledge of the relationship between nature, culture, and art in society, particularly among Malays.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Flora and fauna are frequently depicted in visual art. Indeed, they serve as decorative components and symbols with cultural and philosophical meaning. According to Wan Norasikin et al. (2016), flora and fauna are not just decorative elements in Malay visual art but also have symbolic and philosophical meanings in ancient Malay proverbs. These Malay proverbs use actual imagery such as flora and fauna to convey values such as harmony, humility, and acceptance of fate while preserving cultural identity through language. Fauna lexicon in the Sambas Malay proverb (Chairil Effendy et al., 2022) also found that the use of fauna such as fish, chickens, mammals, and reptiles in local proverbs is to convey moral guidance and communal behaviour.

Malay proverbs based on these natural elements reflect Malay society's understanding of life, human behaviour, and its relationship to the environment. Therefore, using flora and fauna elements in artwork inspired by Malay proverbs provides a new dimension in visual arts. These elements function as aesthetic elements and are a medium of cultural communication. With that, this literature review discusses the concept of Malay proverbs and the meaning and symbolism of flora and fauna elements in Malay culture. Even how these elements are integrated in visual arts production in Malaysia. By understanding these aspects, this study can provide a clearer picture of how visual arts adapt natural elements such as flora and fauna contained in Malay proverbs, as well as the role of this art in maintaining Malay cultural values and heritage.

2.1 Historical Background of Malay Proverb

A brief history of Malay proverbs and their origins Malay proverbs have a rich historical background that dates back centuries. They have been passed down through generations, originating from various sources such as ancient folklore,

religious teachings, and the wisdom of Malay sultans and scholars. These proverbs encapsulate the collective experiences and values of the Malay community, serving as a testament to their resilience, wisdom, and cultural heritage. Malay proverbs remain integral to Malaysia's cultural tapestry as they continue to be shared and celebrated today. Malay proverbs hold immense cultural significance in Malaysia, as they reflect the values and beliefs of the Malay community and serve as a means of preserving and passing down their rich heritage.

These proverbs are often used in everyday conversations, speeches, and writings, acting as a unifying force that strengthens Malaysians' sense of identity and belonging. Additionally, they provide valuable insights into the Malay worldview, offering guidance and wisdom that transcends time and generations. The evolution of Malay proverbs in Malaysian art can be seen through various forms of artistic expression, such as literature, visual arts, and performing arts. These proverbs have been incorporated into poetry, novels, paintings, and traditional dances, showcasing their enduring relevance and influence in Malaysian culture. This integration of proverbs in art not only adds depth and meaning to the artistic works but also serves as a powerful medium for conveying the values and beliefs of the Malay community to a wider audience.

2.2 Definitions of Malay Proverbs

According to Kamus Dewan Fourth Edition (2005), a Malay proverb is a type of figurative language that consists of a sentence or group of words with a fixed order and a specific meaning. Malay proverbs have a short string of words with a very broad meaning. It is also filled with the density of the content of the truth that is pleasant to hear and the words of wisdom that have become a habit in the hearing of previous people (Za'ba, 1965). According to Zaitul Azma Zainon and Ahmad Fuad (2011), the Malays look at their world, which is summed up in the Malay proverbs they created. Proverbs in speech will make statements about the Malay community's thinking as a comparison, an example, and a lesson. With that, the ancients conveyed advice in writing and implicitly. Malay proverbs can only be understood if we understand the proverb's meaning. To understand a Malay proverb, one must comprehend its meaning and analyze the core symbols or symbols that form the foundation of the proverb. (Tenas Effendy, 2013).

In addition, as stated by Zaitul Azma Zainon and Ahmad Fuad (2011), Malay proverbs reflect Malay thought rich in social, moral, and functional values in customs. This shows that it is not only a reflection of the philosophy held by the previous Malay community, but also a guide and life principle practiced daily. Malay proverbs are created based on life experience and radiate the Malays' values and morals (Zaitul Azma Zainon & Ahmad Fuad, 2011). According to Zaa'ba (1965), in the study of Nurul Asma and Awang Azman, (2020), Malay proverbs are one of the most important elements in describing the thinking and common sense of the Malay community in conveying something. It reflects the Malay community's way of life, culture, and social interaction.

Malay proverbs are more than just mere phrases or sentences. They reflect the Malay community's way of life, culture, and social interactions, according to Mohd Ridzuan (2021), these proverbs contain specific meanings, often expressed through metaphorical or figurative language. There are different types of Malay proverbs, including *pepatah*, *simpulan bahasa*, *perbilangan* and *perumpamaan*. Each type has its unique meaning, and preserving the original order of sentences and wording is essential. In writing, the order of sentences in proverbs cannot be changed by adding or subtracting words. Furthermore, Malay proverbs have become a symbol of identity in Malay society. This is because the beauty of the language in the Melayu proverb can describe the delicacy of the Malay community (Saidatul Nornis & Mohd. Rosli, 2013). They represent values and beliefs that are still practiced in everyday life. The beauty of Malay proverbs lies in their ability to convey the philosophy of Malay society, emphasizing the importance of preserving customs and traditions (Mohd Ridzuan, 2021).

The use of Malay proverbs highlights the social and moral values and customs that have been and are still followed by the Malay community. This proverb serves as a reminder of the rich cultural heritage of the Malays and the importance of preserving it. According to Nurul Asma Akmal and Awang Azman, (2020), Malay proverbs act as rules that control life in society before the existence of laws, tips, advice, and all directions taken based on life around people. For example, properties of animals and plants such as “*otak lembu, kaki ayam, bagai aur dengan tebing, and durian runtuh*”. In support of this statement, the study of Nur Alisha (2023), also stated that many Malay proverbs are

taken from the symbols of the surrounding nature to provide a compact and accurate meaning that comes from experience, observation, and keen insight. Elements are used to show how Malay proverbs are not only a guide to life but also serve to provide aesthetic inspiration in various forms of art.

In conclusion, Malay culture is known for its polite and respectful communication style, where proverbs play an important role. According to Hamidah and Siti Marina (2012), another function of Malay proverbs is to warn and express feelings on an issue. In the past, society used less direct language expressions because of the inherent shyness of some individuals. In this context, Malay proverbs offer a powerful medium to convey advice, criticism, or warning metaphorically or satirically without causing offense or discouragement. This proverb emerges from the realization that giving advice or admonishing someone is a complicated endeavor that requires careful consideration of the sentiments of others. Therefore, societies have used metaphors and analogies to convey their messages in a way that can be universally understood. (Mohd Ridzuan, 2021). Not only that, but Malay proverbs can also protect the dignity of an individual and can strengthen the delivery of messages subtly and effectively.

2.3 Universal Elements of Nature and Animals in Malay Proverbs

Nature and animals played an important role in the thinking and culture of traditional Malay society in the past. Natural elements such as plants, rivers, mountains, and various animal species were not economic resources. They functioned as symbols in Malay folk tales and proverbs. Nature played an important role in the lives of the ancient Malay community. According to Arba'ie Sujud et al. (2022), rice, animals, forest products, river products, and firewood were used by the traditional Malay community. This activity was for survival, and it was their source of income. Also, the image of the universe contained in Malay proverbs has inspired previous communities to make Malay proverbs. This proves that past human life is very closely related to the universe.

According to Wan Norasikin et al. (2016), Malay proverbs based on the universe have inspired ancient societies, demonstrating the connection between human life and the universe. The forest, home to thousands of species of plants, animals, and birds, provides valuable knowledge from individual experiences and community experiences, highlighting similarities in animal characteristics. Malay proverbs about animals illustrate the values that exist in society. Through comparisons with animalistic natures, humans tend to judge others with constructive criticism without hurting or humiliating others.

The Sambas Malay community uses proverbs to convey knowledge about local fauna, using them as a poetic tool and language element to convey life messages in everyday communication, highlighting the importance of comparing events (Chairil Effendy et al., 2022). Malay proverbs based on flora and fauna reflect the wisdom of the Malay community in understanding life and nature. They convey noble values and strengthen cultural relationships. Hence, their preservation is crucial for future generations.

2.4 An Artwork's Element Flora and Fauna Inspired by Malay proverbs

This study focuses on two printmaking artworks adapted from Malay proverbs containing flora and fauna elements. The first work is "*Katak Hendak Jadi Lembu*" by Juhari Said. Fauna elements are used in this work. This work also refers to a Malay proverb of meaning and symbolism related to unrealistic change and inspiration. The second artwork, "*Tak Tumbuh Tak Melata*" by A. Rahman Mohamed. This work contains identifiable flora elements. This artwork interprets a Malay proverb about life in the context of Malay culture. Both works have context and depict the artist's unique interpretation of the Malay language.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative approach, focusing on visual analysis methods and literature studies. The focus of this study is to analyze the elements of flora and fauna in artworks inspired by Malay proverbs. This visual analysis examines the techniques, forms, compositions, and symbolism of flora and fauna in both printed artworks.

Furthermore, this method is guided by Terry Barret's art criticism theory. This analysis involves descriptive, formalistic, interpretation, and judgment aspects to understand the meaning and message that the artist is trying to convey.

The literature study also includes references from various academic articles, journals, exhibitions, and authentic sources related to visual arts in Malaysia that use Malay proverbs to understand the cultural and historical context of the work under study. This approach provides a clear picture of how these elements of flora and fauna function as symbols in visual artworks, conveying cultural and social messages, as contained in using Malay proverbs.

3.1 Theory of Art Criticism by Terry Barret

Terry Michael Barret is an American art critic, a professor of art education at the University of North Texas, and Professor Emeritus at Ohio State University: his many books, anthology chapters, and articles about contemporary art, art criticism, and aesthetics. Terry Barret's theory has three steps: description, interpretation, and judgment. Like other art criticism theories, such as Edmund Feldman's critical theory, Terry Barret's theory is also popular and has been widely used in various fields of art, including visual arts, music, literature, and so on.

Terry Barrett believes that the meaning of art depends not only on the artwork of art but also on the process of interacting with the artist, who can also create the artwork. While the audience also interprets it. Furthermore, context is important in understanding and appreciating art, and it needs to go hand in hand. The artist's background, the social and cultural context in which the work is performed, and the experience and interpretation of the individual audience are considered to understand a work better. Terry Barret also believes that art is a medium that can connect the artist and the audience in creating a deeper and more meaningful interaction dialogue. This flow chart shows the arrangement of Terry Barret's theoretical guide to art criticism. He has developed several simple steps for analyzing a work of art.

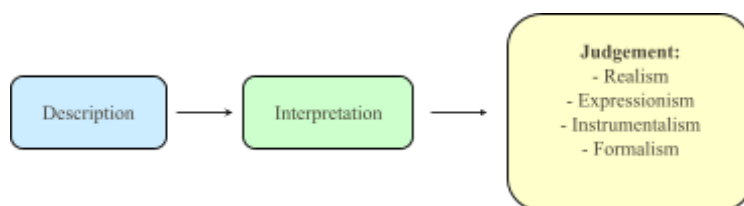


Fig.1. Terry Barret Art Criticism: Description, Interpretation, Judgment

3.1.1 Description

Description is the first process in art criticism, which involves finding, recording, and describing everything found in the details provided, such as the artist's name, title of the work, material, technique, and year of creation. Subject matter refers to a work of art's persons, objects, places, and events. Medium is also used to identify specific materials an artist uses, such as acrylic paint or poly-coated resin; medium is singular, and media is plural. The form provides information about how the artist presents the subject matter (or excludes it) through a chosen medium. It tells of the artwork's composition, arrangement, and visual construction. The "formal elements" of a work of art may include line, shape, light and value, colour, texture, mass, space, and volume. How these formal elements are used is often referred to as the principles of design, which include balance, rhythm, contrast, emphasis, unity, proportion, and movement. Together, these elements and principles enable viewers to understand how an artwork is organized, how meaning is visually constructed, and how the artist communicates ideas through aesthetic choices.

3.1.2 Interpretation

This process refers to interpreting a work of art that covers the stuttered theme. In short, it involves explaining or providing an interpretation related to the meaning, purpose, and effect of a work, either explicitly or implicitly. For example, what message and purpose do the artist want to convey in the work?

Interpretations are often based on worldviews. Each move through the world with a defined set of assumptions about existence through this, everything, including works of art, is interpreted as a reasonable interpretation of works of art. Viewing the background of a work of art through an individual's history, knowledge, beliefs, and tendencies will influence how the work is understood.

Some critics, enriched with a more refined and consistent view of the word, draw from their academic disciplines, such as philosophy or psychology. This depth of understanding can significantly shape their interpretation of art.

3.1.3 Judgement

Judgment is a set of criteria for evaluating a work of art. It refers to aesthetic theory. There are as many aesthetic theories as there are different works of art. The requirements for each theory are based on what the artwork wants to achieve or its main objective. At this level, the artwork is evaluated by giving views, opinions, and decisions based on some observations from the artwork. Judgment is interpreted based on four characteristics of aesthetic criteria with formalism, realism, expressionism, and instrumentalism.

Formalism refers to the beauty of form and structure (element and principal), such as colour, shape, line, texture, and composition. Realism describes real life (reality) clearly and accurately through images, stories, and situations. Expressionism conveys emotions, moods, and feelings, for example, showing feelings of anger, sadness, and so on. Instrumentalism conveys messages, ideas, and functions to educate, inspire, moralize, or change society's views.

These four aesthetic theories, when combined, give a comprehensive framework for evaluating artworks by considering visual quality, representational accuracy, emotional effect, and societal usefulness.

4. ANALYSIS



Fig.2. "Katak Hendak Jadi Lembu", 1997, Woodblock print on paper (Woodcut technique), 73 x 54 cm, Henry Butcher Art Auctioneers, Private Collection, Kuala Lumpur.
Source: Malaysian Art Auction | Art Auction Kuala Lumpur | Henry Butcher Art Auctioneers, 2025

This is one of Juhari Said's printmaking artworks, "Katak Hendak Jadi Lembu" published in 1997. Juhari Said uses a woodblock print on paper (woodblock printing technique) that requires high skill and precision. This technique gives his artwork a rich texture and visual depth. The production of texture makes each print unique and expressive. The use of woodblocks also reflects Juhari Said's commitment to traditional art while paying homage to cultural heritage. The size of this artwork is 73 x 54 cm.

Several elements and ideas in Juhari Said's artwork "Katak Hendak Jadi Lembu" are subject to individual analysis. The first element is form. Two images have been combined into a frog and a cow hybrid. This image is created in detail. The shape of the frog can be seen based on the image of the hind legs and tail. The shape of the cow can be seen through the shape of the head and black and white spotting on the hybrid form. This image is put together based on a Malay proverb. Using black and white can help highlight shapes and lines more clearly. Next, the line. This work highlights the use of clear, bold, and firm lines. The production of these lines forms the image and gives texture and

visual direction to the artwork. The inner lines in this artwork are used in detail to form the image of the frog's skin and the marks on the cow's body. Thick and thin lines are used to emphasize the texture and physical characteristics of the two animals.

Another element that can be seen in this artwork is colour. This artist has limited the color scale to black and white. The contrast between these colours has helped highlight the main elements of the artwork. In terms of texture, this print has its texture. Texture is important because it gives an extra dimension and creates a physical feeling in the artwork. Not only that, but the texture of the wood adds depth and visual richness. There are positive and negative spaces in this artwork. The use of space in this artwork appears against the wall but is still effective. The negative space is on animal shapes, while the negative space is seen on a white background to create balance and provide a clear focus on the main subject, the frog and the cow.

In terms of design principles, this artwork shows a balance of symmetry and asymmetry, where the image of the frog and the cow provide balance in terms of visuals. Balance in the artwork is very important to ensure that all the elements in the work look harmonious and support the narrative. Contrast can be seen in terms of the use of colour and shape. The contrast of black and white can give a very strong visual effect. Contrasting colours can also highlight the artwork's shape and texture. Contrast is also seen in the form used. The shape of the frog and the cow can highlight the difference between the two animals. Not only that, thick and thin lines add visual dynamics and can attract the audience to the main elements of the artwork.

Next, emphasis is placed on using thick lines, clear form (direct image) and colour contrast. Emphasizing characters can attract attention and convey the main message of the artwork. The repetition of motifs in black-and-white patterns on the cow's body gives consistency and rhythm to the artwork. Elements of repetition help create rhythm and visual movement in the work. It can also add texture and depth to the artwork. Next, unity can be achieved using consistent and harmonious elements. All the elements work together to convey the message of the Malay proverb in a coherent visual way. The combination can be seen in the frog and cow hybrid form. It makes a cohesive and dynamic composition.

Finally, movement can be seen from the direction of the lines used in the artwork. The lines and shapes in this artwork have created the illusion of movement, where this hybrid animal seems to be moving or crawling somewhere else. In fact, line and shape elements can also create movement in the viewer's eyes around the artwork to help them follow the narrative desired by the artist.

Juhari Said's artwork, "*Katak Hendak Jadi Lembu*" is inspired by Malay proverbs and focuses on the desire of an ordinary person to be a high-ranking person. The artwork uses realistic woodblock print techniques to combine images of frogs and cows into one body, combining them into a hybrid animal. The title, "*Katak Hendak Jadi Lembu*" (A Frog Aspiring to be a Cow)," is a twist from the Malay adage "*Katak Dibawah Tempurung*" (A Frog under the Coconut Shell).

The artwork uses symbols to symbolise the visual image chosen by the artist, combining images of frogs and cows into a hybrid animal. In Malaysian culture, cows are often symbolised as big and brainy animals, but their nature is often debated due to superficial actions. Frogs, small amphibians with two worlds, benefit humans most as they provide food. However, a frog wanting to become a cow is impossible due to physical factors, life cycle, and characteristics that differentiate their abilities.

The artwork explores several archetypes, including a person's desire to do something beyond one's ability or the proverb's meaning. It highlights the importance of measuring one's body and standing on one's feet, as abilities and privileges differ from others. The artwork reflects the attitude of individuals who want to act like big people, rich and influential, ultimately causing trouble for themselves.

The artwork "*Katak Hendak Jadi Lembu*" by Juhari Said uses visual images of frogs and cows to convey a clear and easily understandable message. These animals are universally recognised and significant in culture and daily life,

with frogs found in tropical areas in Malaysia and cows being important domestic animals in agrarian communities. The artwork's visual elements, such as shape, composition, colour, and techniques, focus on the internal metamorphosis of the frog character, who desires to become like a brave cow. The balanced composition and clear form direct the viewer's attention to the main conflict in the artwork, as the frog's ambition is too impossible to achieve.

Juhari Said sees this art as a tool to convey a social message about the human desire to achieve what is incompatible with reality or personal capabilities. The work may also convey a message about irrational ambition or dissatisfaction in society, especially in a society trapped in unrealistic idealism. The artwork raises the theme of a Malay proverb describing the inappropriate nature of ambition or limited human abilities. It encourages self-reflection and acceptance of one's situation, refraining from excessive dreams of transforming into something different.



Fig.2. "Tak Tumbuh Tak Melata", 2009, Collagraph, 60 x 80 cm
Source: Yumpu.com, 2026

The artwork of A. Rahman Mohamed's permanent collection is a work inspired by a Malay proverb. According to him, the preparation of the blocks by collagraphy uses materials such as cardboard and sand to get interesting weaving effects. The de-leaf images selected as the main subject were randomly arranged to represent the artwork's title, "*Tak Tumbuh, Tak Melata*" (2009), which measures 60 x 80 cm. A. Rahman Mohamed presents works themed on the elements of nature. He chose the appropriate subject matter and treated the subject abstractly as a self-statement of an artist who carries the message of preserving nature. In time, the same represents himself, who was interested in gardening.

The artwork "*Tak Tumbuh Tak Melata*" (2009) by A. Rahman Mohamed features a variety of elements and artistic principles that can strengthen the meaning and aesthetics of the work. Looking at the elements of art, there are soft and wavy organic lines in this work. Lines like this have formed a flora element that can be symbolised as the growth and continuity of nature itself. These lines also function to form the structure of interconnected leaves and stems. With this, a close relationship is created between one element and another. Next, this artist uses flora shapes such as leaves processed abstractly, which can still be recognized as elements of nature itself. The forms of the flora are not rigid or geometric. They are more free-form and resemble living plants. Also, the flora drawn is an image of a young seedling with a stalk.

The main colour used in this work is dominated by green in various tones, such as dark green and light green. This colour reflects harmony and tranquility with the environment. There is also an earthy yellow colour to add dimension and strengthen the theme of the mini style. The use of bright colour contrasts such as black and white further highlights the plant elements and creates visual balance in the artwork. In addition, the collage technique used in the work gives a rough and overlapping texture effect. This texture effect creates dimension and enriches the surface of this work. This technique can add elements of depth and layering and make this work more complex and dynamic.

Using negative and positive space in the work helps form a dynamic composition. This can be seen when the flora elements are spread in an asymmetrical arrangement. For example, the plant image is placed spontaneously and not

considered so that it is more interesting and can leave impressions on the principal. The use of negative and positive space has been instrumental in creating a dynamic arrangement. Meanwhile, the variation of green tones from dark to light also adds depth to this work. Finally, the value in this work is applied through variations in the main colour tone, namely green. The change from dark green tones to light green has given a dramatic lighting effect according to its suitability. With that, the shape of the flora in the work is formed. The green tone also helps to make certain elements stand out more in the work's overall composition.

In terms of balance, this work features asymmetrical balance. It is where the flora elements are arranged asymmetrically but still look harmonious. The shape of the leaves that are placed throughout the work without a rigid arrangement. It has created a more organic visual balance. Combining light and dark elements also helps create a balance of colours in the artwork. Next, in terms of contrast, it is applied through shape, colour, and texture. The dark green colour tone is used as the background in the work. White and earthy yellow are used to highlight the leaf elements. Thus, a dramatic effect is created and can attract the attention of the audience. The difference in texture resulting from the sandy printing block, which is a rough and smooth surface, has added visual depth to the artwork.

In terms of emphasis, how many bright leaf shapes function as the focal point in the work? For example, the white leaves are placed in a framed space. They look brighter and can attract attention and create a dominant visual effect. This can also help the audience appreciate certain parts before the eye moves to other elements. Movement is realized through organic curved lines, curved organic lines, and the leaves are arranged non-static. It is easier to understand the image of leaves arranged randomly or as if cascading; the leaves seem to "move" or grow naturally. This movement is also strengthened by the changing colour tones, which have given the work the illusion of depth.

In addition, the work contains repetition through the leaves, which appear in a variety of sizes, shapes, and colours. This repetition reinforces the theme of nature and helps create visual continuity throughout the artwork. At the same time, the small variations in these repeated forms prevent monotony and contribute to a more dynamic visual effect. Finally, unity can be achieved by using parallel colours. The uniform collage technique and the flora element, namely the leaves, make up the main element in this work. Each of these elements helps each other and produces a cohesive, not isolated composition. Thus, the combination of artistic elements and artistic principles has helped the work effectively convey a message related to nature and human life. At the same time, the theme of Malay proverbs that are brought into visual art can be strengthened.

The selection of images of leaves arranged randomly or as if cascading brings the meaning of the proverb that is used as the work title, "*Tak Tumbuh Tak Melata*". The images of leaves, which are symbolic of the nature of trees, are used as examples and lead to a lesson for humans. The images of leaves are a single "subject". The subject represents nature but does not represent a specific type of tree. In other words, the "subject" of the leaves is the leaves that are randomly made in the work. A. Rahman describes the images of leaves as symbolic of human life itself. In addition, this work is also his inspiration based on his experience of growing crops at home. Philosophically, the plant (leaves) is like a human in terms of its growth cycle. Starting from a seed, it needs sufficient water, given quality soil and fertilizer, which then affects the fertility of the tree. In terms of technique, this artist uses the collage technique from materials such as cardboard paper and sand. This technique gives very interesting interwoven results. This artist uses non-toxic ink and discarded materials to express his heart and depict his love for nature and the environment. This artwork's title, materials, and techniques closely relate to the artist's interest in plants. Because of that, the concept brought in this work is also related to nature and humans.

In terms of the context of human life, he sees similarities between the cycle of plants and humans. It is where, in terms of the environment, food and mixing affect the character and instincts of the human heart. The use of subject images in this work has brought the concept of Malay tradition because of natural elements such as flora. In terms of the expression of the sentence from the title of this work, which is "*Tak Tumbuh Tak Melata*", this is an adaptation of the use of a Malay proverb, namely, "*Tak tumbuh tak melata, tak sungguh orang tak kata*". The Malay proverb means that if people say something about it, there must be a reason. In addition, this work also matches a "*pantun*" that is still related to humans and nature. The dominant image of leaves with a greenish tone in the work also carries the message of harmony, sustainability of nature, and human intimacy with the environment. Overall, "*Tak Tumbuh Tak Melata*"

combines elements of flora with the concept of Malay proverbs to convey a profound message about life and nature. The message delivery for this work is very subtle and full of implicit meaning. The choice of subject is direct and easy to understand. The choice of flora subject also reflects the artist's interest in gardening and reminds the audience of the balance in a preserved ecosystem.

The artwork "*Tak Tumbuh Tak Melata*" (2009) by A. Rahman Mohamed is effective because it combines flora elements with Malay proverbs. Using green-toned leaf images as the main subject has led to a deep symbolic meaning. Also, the leaf image emphasizes the role of the flora element as a metaphor for life and change. In terms of technology, the collagraph technique used in this printmaking work gives a texture effect that resembles the natural structure of leaves and soil. This effect is produced from a combination of cardboard and sand materials on the print block. Thus, this technique can strengthen the concept of the flora element in the work visually and provide a physical sensation to the audience who sees this work. As a result, this work strengthens the relationship between the medium of art and the natural world. Also, the materials used unite the message that this artist is trying to convey.

The leaf image was chosen as a direct image from the viewpoint of the flora element. The subject of this leaf is very compatible with the natural processes in plant life, namely growth, maturity, and loss. These leaves also reflect the human life cycle. All of this aligns with the selection of the Malay proverb, "*Tak Tumbuh Tak Melata*". In terms of the message and impact of this work, this work connects Malay culture with the importance of flora and the surrounding environment. The appearance of this plant element as the main subject brings the beauty of flora and invites viewers to understand the balance of the ecosystem and human life. This also reflects the artist's hobby of farming. From this personal interest, the artist translated it into printmaking artwork as a form of expression and appreciation for flora. Overall, "*Tak Tumbuh Tak Melata*" strongly brings concepts and techniques. This work showcases flora elements and elevates the use of Malay proverbs as a platform to understand the relationship between humans, the environment, and life. The flora element also functions as a metaphor that carries a deep message about continuity and balance in daily life.

5. FINDINGS

The findings in this study show that two printmaking works were analysed, namely "*Tak Tumbuh Tak Melata*" (2009) by A. Rahman Mohamed and "*Katak Hendak Jadi Lembu*" (1997) by Juhari Said. Both works show elements of flora and fauna used as visual symbols in artworks adapted from Malay proverbs. A more methodical approach to analyzing these works is made possible by Terry Barrett's theory of explanation, interpretation, and consideration. This theory not only analyses the formal qualities and symbolic meanings of flora and fauna, but also their cultural and social implications. Through this approach, the investigation may show how these two local artists can transform Malay proverbs into visual language. This allows a deeper understanding to be achieved about the relationship between form, meaning and cultural values in Malay printing. Overall, Juhari Said's analysis is more aggressive, with fauna motifs used to criticise social behaviour. A. Rahman Mohamed's works featuring flora elements are more weathered and melancholier. Thus, both works demonstrate the depth of Malay culture, and that the usage of flora and fauna motifs in printmaking has a deeper symbolic value beyond mere adornment in the artwork.

Table 1. Theory of Terry Barret in the artwork "*Katak Hendak Jadi Lembu*" (1997) by Juhari Said

Source: Author's Personal Collection, 2024

No	Terry Barrett	Statement
1	Description	This artwork includes an image (fauna) of a frog in the shadow of a cow. Using woodblock print methods.
2	Interpretation	The image of the frog represents human nature that is ambitious and exceeds one's own skills. The cow's picture indicates strength and status.

- | | | |
|---|----------|---|
| 3 | Judgment | Juhari Said uses rough printing techniques and black and white contrast to bitterly criticise greedy and unrealistic human behaviours. More prone to emulate the styles of others despite being unable to do so. The use of the frog image enhances the satire's effectiveness. At the same time, it resembles the symbolism of Malay proverbs. |
|---|----------|---|

Table 2. Summary of judgment for the artwork “Katak Hendak Jadi Lembu” (1997)

Source: Author's Personal Collection, 2024

No	Judgement	Statement
1	Formalism	Use clear and easily recognizable fauna images, namely frogs and cows. Balanced shapes and compositions, bright contrasting colours. The printing technique highlights the visual and focuses on the main conflict.
2	Realism	Frogs and cows are seen as animals close to the daily lives of society. Easy to understand by audiences of various backgrounds because they are universal.
3	Expressionism	Frogs are depicted through metamorphosis, which is a symbol of the desire to change. Metamorphosis is a biological term that means a complete change in the form or structure of an organism in its life cycle. Visuals express emotions and satire on greed and dissatisfaction.
4	Instrumentalism	This work is a tool to convey a social message. Criticizes human attitudes that are excessively greedy and unrealistic. Encourages viewers to think about the limits of their own abilities and accept reality.

Overall, this table summarises four dimensions of judgement from the artwork “*Katak hendak jadi lembu*” (1997). This artwork skillfully conveys social criticism through the hybrid images of fauna, making its message both impactful and thought provoking.

Table 3. Theory of Terry Barret in the artwork “Tak Tumbuh Tak Melata” (2009) by A. Rahman Mohamed

Source: Author's Personal Collection, 2025

No	Terry Barrett	Statement
1	Description	Using plant themes (flora) that spread and link. Using the print technique with repetition composition.
2	Interpretation	The flowing flora theme represents the continuation of a person's existence and the principle of "cause and effect" in accordance with the Malay proverb “ <i>Tak tumbuh tak melata, tak sungguh orang tak kata</i> ”.
3	Judgment	This work uses flora imagery to elevate the nature of traditional wisdom into the setting of contemporary art. The employment of multilayer printing techniques creates the illusion of motion and expansion. It also emphasises the philosophical meaning of existence. This Malay proverb means that if someone says something, there must be a reason. If there is a creeping plant, it is due to its seeds or roots. In the context of life, if something happens (effect), there must be a cause (cause).

Table 4. Summary of judgment for the artwork “Tak Tumbuh Tak Melata” (2009)

Source: Author's Personal Collection, 2025

No	Judgement	Statement
1	Formalism	The layered composition using the printing technique gives a rich textural effect. The dominant colour green symbolizes nature, growth, and the continuity of life.

		The floral motifs are arranged repeatedly, emphasizing the principle of balance and visual beauty.
2	Realism	Symbolizes the continuity of life and the principle of cause and effect that is understood in daily reality. This Malay proverb means that if someone says something, there must be a reason. If there is a creeping plant, it is due to its seeds or roots. In the context of life, if something happens (effect), there must be a cause (cause).
3	Expressionism	This work evokes a sense of harmony, fertility, and the continuity of life. The symbol of creeping plants evokes emotions about human dependence on nature. There is an awareness that every event has its own reason and wisdom.
4	Instrumentalism	This work functions as a medium to educate and convey the philosophy of proverbs. Reminds that every event has its reason and wisdom. Encourages viewers to appreciate the value of tradition and nature as a source of teaching.

Overall, this table summarises four dimensions of judgement from the artwork “*Tak Tumbuh Tak Melata*” (2009). Using flora elements, this artwork symbolically conveys the harmony between human life and the natural world.

5.1 A Comparison of Two Artworks

This comparison shows two printmaking artworks, namely “*Katak Hendak Jadi Lembu*” (1997) by Juhari Said and “*Tak Tumbuh Tak Melata*” (2009) by A. Rahman Mohamed, to highlight the differences and similarities in terms of several aspects detailed in the table. The purpose is to provide a clearer picture of the approach, symbolism, and message highlighted by both artworks.

Table 5. A comparison of the artwork “*Katak Hendak Jadi Lembu*” (1997) and “*Tak Tumbuh Tak Melata*” (2009)
Source: Author's Personal Collection, 2025

No	Aspect	“ <i>Katak Hendak Jadi Lembu</i> ” (1997)	“ <i>Tak Tumbuh Tak Melata</i> ” (2009)
1	Artist	Juhari Said	A. Rahman Mohamed
2	Technique and Medium	Woodcut (wood block print), black and white contrast, wood texture.	Collograph from cardboard and sand, layered green colour, rough texture
3	Visual Style	Figurative with a hybrid image of a frog and a cow.	Abstract image of leaves in various places.
4	Element of Art	Thick and thin lines, hybrid shape (frog and cow), monochrome colour.	Organic lines, flora shapes, green, yellow, black and white.
5	Principle	Strong contrast, balance of symmetry and asymmetry, emphasis on the main image, and movement.	Asymmetrical balance, repetition of leaf shapes, harmony of colours, rhythm and organic movement.
6	Theme	Social criticism, namely humans who have high ambitions beyond their own capabilities.	Philosophy of life and nature, namely the cycle of plants (flora) as a metaphor for continuous life.
7	Symbolism	Fauna, namely frogs & cows as symbols of society.	Flora, which is shaped like leaves as a symbol of growth and continuity of life.
8	Malay proverb	“ <i>Katak Hendak Jadi Lembu</i> ” is a satire on unrealistic and too high aspirations that are not in line with their own capabilities.	“ <i>Tak tumbuh tak melata, tak sungguh orang tak kata</i> ” means that people say about something that must have a reason.
9	Message	Rebuking human nature that is greedy and not grounded in reality.	Inviting people to understand the cycle of life, the environment and harmony.

6. CONCLUSION

The study reveals that flora and fauna elements are crucial in Malay proverbs, serving as decorative and symbolic symbols in art. The analysis of two artworks, "*Tak Tumbuh Tak Melata*" by A. Rahman Mohamed and "*Katak Hendak Jadi Lembu*" by Juhari Said, reveals that these elements not only represent the Malay community's culture but also their philosophy of life and social criticism. The study also highlights that Malay proverbs are not just a linguistic heritage but also a rich source of inspiration for visual art. By incorporating flora and fauna, traditional values can be presented in a universal and relevant visual form, connecting culture, nature, and community life. This study underscores the importance of flora and fauna in art, highlighting its potential to strengthen cultural identity and convey relevant messages to present and future societies.

The broader implications of the study include a better understanding of how ancient Malay wisdom continues to inspire contemporary Malaysian art. The use of flora and fauna motifs based on Malay proverbs can illustrate the ability of Malaysian artists to translate cultural identity by using various printing techniques. This also highlights the importance of visual art as a tool for cultural preservation and community education. However, this study has certain limitations. This analysis only focused on two different printmaking works by artists in Malaysia which may not represent the full range of artworks based on the use of Malay proverbs. Furthermore, the theoretical approach used in this analysis may limit the broad interpretation of the works. Therefore, we can further expand the study in the future by selecting more local artists and other artworks and different works. For example, works from painting, sculpture, ceramics, and time based. In addition to using comparative methods or using alternative theories such as semiotics, personality theory and Carl Jung's psychoanalysis and cultural studies. Overall, this study has highlighted the richness in the use of Malay proverbs as a cultural resource in visual arts. It can open space for further studies on the relationship between traditional wisdom, contemporary cultural identity and artistic practice.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS/FUNDING

I would like to express sincere gratitude to my main supervisor, Dr. Nurul Huda Mohd Din, and co-supervisor, Pm. Mohd Suhaimi Tohid, for their continuous guidance, support, and valuable insights throughout the completion of this research. Appreciation is also extended to the Faculty of Art and Design, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam, Selangor, for providing the necessary resources and academic environment that facilitated this study. This research did not receive any financial support or funding from public, commercial, or not-for-profit organizations.

Authors' Contributions:

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors agree that this research was conducted in the absence of any self-benefits, commercial or financial conflicts and declare the absence of conflicting interests with the funders.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

[Nur Fatiha Aziera Ain binti Mohd Khime]: Substantial contribution to the conception and design of the study, including data collection, analysis, interpretation, and manuscript preparation.

[Dr. Nurul Huda Mohd Din]: Provided continuous supervision, guidance in research design and methodology, and extensive support in refining the research framework and manuscript development.

[Pm. Mohd Suhaimi Tohid]: Provided feedback for improvement of the research, contributing to the enhancement of the overall clarity and quality of the study.

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this work, the author used QuillBot AI to improve the grammar, readability, and language quality of the manuscript. After using this tool, the author repeatedly reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The author declares that this research did not involve human or animal subjects. All research procedures were conducted in accordance with the institutional research guidelines of Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM).

REFERENCES

- Arba'ie Sujud Azie Azmi, & Nik Rafidah Nik Muhamad Affendi. (2022). Nature is a symbol of Malay thinking. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 12(7), 654–661. <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJRBS/v12-i7/13151>
- Balazs Huszka, Hajah Zurinah Haji Ya'akub, Rabi'atul Adawiyah Haji Hassan, Siti Ifwah Fauzani Haji Chuchu, & Alexander Stark. (2025). The metaphorical construction of cultural identity in Malay proverbs. *International Journal of Arts and Social Science*, 8(4), 124–161.
- Chairill Effendy, Dedy Ari Asfar, Agus Syahrani, Utari Rahayu, Mellisa Jupitasari, & Binar Kurniasari Febrianti. (2023). Fauna lexicon in Malay proverbs: Revealing the symbolic meaning in the Malay community of Sambas. *EAI Endorsed Transactions on Context-aware Systems and Applications*, 9(3), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.4108/eai.20-9-2022.2334189>
- Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka. (2005). *Kamus Dewan Bahasa* (Edisi ke-4). Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Hamidah Abdul Wahab, & Siti Marina Kamil. (2012). The Malay proverbs: A reflection of Malay politeness and culture. *GEMA Online Journal of Language Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.33736/ils.1687.2012>
- Henry Butcher Art Auctioneers. (2025). *Malaysian art auction | Art auction Kuala Lumpur*. <https://www.hbart.com.my/>
- Mohd Nafis Saad, Rosmidahanim Razali, Ruzamira Abdul Razak, Muhammad Salehuddin Zakaria, & Siti Humaini Said Ahmad @ Syed Ahmad. (2022). Significance of the frog image as a cultural symbol in printmaking. *Kupas Seni*, 10(1), 12–20. <https://doi.org/10.37134/kupasseni.vol10.1.2.2022>
- Mohd Ridzuan Mohd Nasir. (2021). Memahami asal usul peribahasa Melayu “biar mati anak, jangan mati adat”. *Dewan Budaya*. <https://dewanbudaya.jendeladb.my/2021/06/04/memahami-asal-usul-peribahasa-melayu-biar-mati-anak-jangan-mati-adat/>
- Muhammad Zaidi Yusoff. (2017). *Adaptasi peribahasa Melayu dalam karya arca awam*. Universiti Malaysia Sarawak Institutional Repository. <https://ir.unimas.my/id/eprint/14504>
- Nur Alisha Mengga. (2023). Unsur tumbuhan sebagai perlambangan dalam peribahasa Iban: Plant elements as symbols in Iban proverbs. *PENDETA*, 14(2), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.37134/pendeta.vol14.2.1.2023>
- Nurul Asmaa Akmal Md Din & Awang Azman Awang Pawi. (2020). Peribahasa Melayu dan terjemahannya dalam bahasa Inggeris dari aspek budaya. *Jurnal Melayu Sedunia*, 3(1), 210–241. <https://ejournal.um.edu.my/index.php/jurnalmelayusedunia/article/view/27639>
- Saidatul Nornis Hj. Mahali, & Mohd Rasdi Saamah. (2013). Haiwan sebagai perlambangan dalam peribahasa orang Semai. *GEMA: Online Journal of Language Studies*, 13(1), 83–98. <http://www.ukm.my/ppbl/Gema/gemahome.html>
- Wan Norasikin Wan Ismail, Abdul Latif Samian, & Nazri Muslim. (2016). Bird element symbolism in Malay proverbs. *International Journal of Asian Social Science*, 7(2), 119–125. <https://doi.org/10.18488/journal.1/2017.7.2/1.2.119.125>

- Wan Norasikin Wan Ismail, Abdul Latif Samian, & Nazri Muslim. (2016). The symbol of animals in Malay proverbs. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 6(3), 148–154. https://www.ijhssnet.com/journals/Vol_6_No_3_March_2016/17.pdf
- Yumpu.com. (2026). *Tema sastra klasik Melayu: Peribahasa dan bidalan dalam karya*.
<https://www.yumpu.com/id/document/view/6617978/tema-sastra-klasik-melayu-peribahasa-dan-bidalan-dalam-karya->
- Zaitul Azma Zainon Hamzah, & Ahmad Fuad Mat Hassan. (2011). Bahasa dan pemikiran dalam peribahasa Melayu. *GEMA: Online Journal of Language Studies*, 11(3), 31–51. <http://www.ukm.my/ppbl/Gema/gemahome.html>
- Za'ba. (1965). *Ilmu Mengarang Melayu*. Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.



© 2026 by the authors. Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY-NC-ND) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).