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When history refuses a passport: The transnational Malay world in Rida K. Liamsi's *Megat*

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Abstract: *This article examines Rida K. Liamsi's Megat as a representation of a transnational Malay world beyond modern state boundaries. It argues that the novel imagines the Malay world as a historical community connected long before Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore existed. The study draws on the Transnational Literary Studies approach of Paul Jay and Mads Rosendahl Thomsen, which views literature as a cultural practice crossing national borders, together with Jan Assmann's and Aleida Assmann's Memory Studies to explain how literary narratives produce, transmit, and negotiate collective memory. Using a descriptive-qualitative method and close reading, the study analyses the novel's narrative structure, representations of space, character mobility, and construction of cultural memory. The findings show that Megat presents the Malay world as a space where people, language, history, and shared feelings circulate beyond geopolitical boundaries. Characters moving across Johor, Melaka, Singapore, and the Riau Islands, together with the reconstruction of Megat Seri Rama as a shared figure of Malay memory, show that cultural identity is rooted more in historical networks than in modern citizenship. The article concludes that Megat is a transnational historical novel affirming the continuity of the Malay world as a cultural space beyond passports, borders, and states.*

Keywords: *Megat, Rida K. Liamsi, transnational literature, cultural memory, Malay world*

INTRODUCTION

Modern national borders often make history appear as if it has a nationality. Events that took place in Johor are treated as Malaysian history, while events that took place in Riau, particularly what is now the Riau Islands Province, are positioned as Indonesian history. Yet before Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore existed as modern nation-states, the Strait of Melaka and the surrounding islands had already been a connected and overlapping space of human movement, language, trade, political power, religion, and culture. In this historical context, Malay identity cannot easily be understood through contemporary political boundaries. Andaya (2008), for example, argues that Malay communities developed within a wide regional network around the Strait of Melaka. Economic and political interactions formed a fluid cultural space, while identities and group boundaries continued to change. The Malay world is therefore better understood as a space of relationships than as a territory strictly defined by geographical and political lines.

This discussion becomes more interesting when the history of the Malay world is represented in literature. Literature does not simSply reproduce past events; it can also bring back memories of a community that has been fragmented by political and geopolitical change. From a transnational literary perspective, attention is not directed only to works that come from or speak about one particular country, but also to mobility, exchange, relationships, and forms of identity that cross national borders. Jay (2021),

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for example, sees history, identity, migration, diaspora, globalization, and decolonization as important parts of the field of transnational literary studies. He views transnationality not simply as geographical movement, but also as a way of reading the relationships among literature, society, and forces that continue to cross national boundaries.

This view is consistent with Thomsen's (2008) discussion of transnational literature and the world literary system. For Thomsen, literary mapping cannot be fully limited by national frameworks because literary works move through wider networks of exchange and circulation. This perspective makes it possible to read literature as part of a cultural space that extends beyond the state. In the context of the Malay world, a transnational approach is relevant because the region was historically shaped by networks connecting the Malay Peninsula, Sumatra, the Riau Islands, and various trading centers and kingdoms around the Strait of Melaka. Recent studies of Malay transnationalism have also explicitly shown that Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, and Singapore can be understood as part of a continuing field of transnational interaction negotiated through language, identity, and culture (Noorashid, 2025).

Within this historical context, Rida K. Liamsi's Megat offers an interesting object of study. First published by Sagang Intermedia Pers in 2016, the 521-page novel uses the history of the Johor Sultanate as one of its narrative foundations. The novel brings together the late seventeenth century and contemporary life, making Megat Seri Rama and the death of Sultan Mahmud Syah II important points in its story. Megat therefore deals not only with what happened in the past, but also with how that past is understood, passed on, debated, and given new meaning by people in the present. Liamsi's choice of the tragedy of Sultan Mahmud Syah II is significant because the event itself has continued to be interpreted. Barnard (2016) shows that the killing of Sultan Mahmud Syah II in 1699 is an important event in Malay history and has been retold in different forms, from traditional chronicles to comics and films. Each retelling adds new elements, perspectives, and interpretations. History in this case is therefore not a completely fixed set of facts, but a field of interpretation that continues to be connected to present needs and perspectives. This reading can be placed alongside Shomary, Tinambunan, and Sudirman's (2023) study of the relationship between Liamsi's biography and the novel's sociological dimensions; the present article extends that discussion by foregrounding cross-border memory and transnational space.

This is where memory becomes important. Megat can be read as one of the media that reactivates what Assmann (2011) calls cultural memory. Cultural memory does not simply mean an individual's memory of the past. It concerns how a community preserves, organizes, and transmits knowledge of the past through symbolic forms and cultural media. Assmann distinguishes between communicative memory and cultural memory. Communicative memory concerns relatively recent experiences and their transmission between generations, while cultural memory survives through texts, rituals, symbols, and cultural artifacts. Assmann later broadened this discussion to the media and mechanisms that allow the past to remain present in contemporary social life. The distinction between communicative and cultural memory is also foundational in Assmann and Czaplicka (1995), while Aleida Assmann's (2010) account of canon and archive clarifies how some versions of the past become culturally active and others remain latent.

From this perspective, Megat Seri Rama in *Megat* can be understood not only as a historical figure but also as a memory figure who carries debates about power, betrayal, justice, dignity, and identity. The killing of Sultan Mahmud Syah II, the relationship between Johor and Riau, and the continuation of Malay genealogical and cultural lines all become part of a memory that continues to be negotiated. Previous studies of Megat have shown the strength of its historical and intertextual dimensions. Yumna Eltias, Syafrial (2017), for instance, identified 132 historical motifs in *Megat* (Liamsi, 2016) that are intertextually related to *Tuhfat al-Nafis* (Haji, 1982) and *Sulalatus Salatin* (Ahmad, 1979), consisting of motifs of rejection, confirmation, and innovation. This finding is important, but it also opens room for further discussion: if history in Megat is shaped through relationships among texts and passed on to contemporary readers, the question is, "How does this history work as cultural memory beyond national borders?" Erll (2011b) further emphasizes that memories travel through media and across cultural contexts, making the novel a useful site for examining how historical remembrance moves beyond a single national frame.

The existing scholarship on Megat has established its intertextual historical motifs (Yumna Eltias, Syafrial, 2017) and the relationship between the author's life and the novel's social-cultural world (Shomary et al., 2023). These studies provide an important basis, but they do not make transnational cultural memory their central analytical focus. The present study addresses that gap by bringing transnational literary studies into dialogue with memory studies.

This question becomes more significant because the historical space presented in *Megat* does not stop at one political territory. Johor has close historical connections with Melaka, Pahang, Bintan, Riau, and Lingga. Virginia Matheson shows that the Lingga-Riau kingdom traced its line of authority back to earlier Malay kingdoms, including Melaka, Singapore, and Bintan. Even changes in the names and centers of power of these kingdoms show that political categories used today do not always correspond to the political configurations of the Malay world in the past (Matheson, 1986). Thus, when Megat connects Johor, Melaka, Riau, the Riau Islands, and Singapore, the novel is dealing with more than geographical setting: it is reconstructing a Malay cultural space that was historically cross-border.

Based on this context, this article reads Megat as a transnational Malay historical novel. The term transnational is not used here simply to refer to characters moving from one country to another. Transnationality is understood as the presence of historical networks, identities, cultural spaces, and memories that extend beyond the borders of modern nation-states. This perspective is important because Malay identity itself is historical and dynamic. Andaya (2008) shows that ethnic identity around the Strait of Melaka is not a completely fixed category but was formed through long processes of social, economic, and political interaction. On this basis, the article argues that Megat does not simply reconstruct the history of the Johor Sultanate or the tragedy of Sultan Mahmud Syah II. It reconstructs the Malay world as a cultural and memory space that existed before and extends beyond modern nation-state borders. This argument also resonates with research on cultural memory between national and transnational frameworks Velicu (2011) and with Erll's (2011b) and Jünke (2021) overview of transnational memory as remembrance circulating beyond bounded national and cultural frameworks.

The novel allows Malay history to be read not as separate national histories belonging to Indonesia and Malaysia, but as a history with continuity across regions. In this sense, the phrase "when history refuses a passport" is a metaphor for a situation in which cultural memory, genealogical relationships, language, and historical experience cannot be forced to follow contemporary political borders. This study therefore addresses two main questions: (1) how is the transnationality of the Malay world represented in Megat; and (2) how is collective memory of Malay history constructed and negotiated through the novel's narrative? To answer these questions, the study uses Transnational Literary Studies, especially the work of Paul Jay and Mads Rosendahl Thomsen, together with Memory Studies, particularly Jan Assmann's concept of cultural memory and Aleida Assmann's further work on memory. By bringing these two perspectives together, the article shows that Megat presents literature as an alternative space in which the Malay world can be imagined again as a cultural community that does not disappear simply because modern states have drawn borders.

At this point, literature has a function beyond simply preserving stories of the past. It becomes a space where fragmented histories can be brought together, divided memories can be negotiated, and identities restricted by geopolitics can be imagined within a wider horizon. Megat can therefore be read as an attempt to return Malay history to its broader cultural space, a space that, long before passports, was already familiar with sailing, trade, marriage, language, kingdoms, religion, and shared memory.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Transnational Literature: Beyond Nation-State Borders

The concept of the transnational in literary studies emerged from the recognition that the category of "national literature" is not always sufficient to explain works shaped by human mobility, cultural exchange, migration, diaspora, colonial history, and cross-regional relationships. According to Jay (2021), a transnational approach allows literary studies to move beyond the nation as its main unit of analysis. In Transnational Literature: The Basics, Jay specifically discusses the relationship between literature and mobility, borders, migration, identity, and history. Transnational literature therefore should not be understood only as literature written by migrants or members of diasporas. It can also refer to literature that shows how identity, history, and culture are formed through relationships across national borders. Work in memory studies likewise cautions against treating collective remembrance as contained within one nation: (Erll, 2011a, 2026) discusses literary afterlives and transcultural memory, while Jünke (2021) maps the role of literary translation and transfer in transcultural memory circulation.

From this perspective, the nation-state is not the only space that determines cultural identity. One function of transnational studies is to question the tendency to treat political borders as natural boundaries of culture. Transnational literary studies are closely related to globalization, cosmopolitanism, diaspora, history, identity, migration, and decolonization. Literature becomes a space where these relationships are negotiated through narrative form, language, representations of space, and constructions of identity (Jay, 2021).

This perspective can be developed further through Thomsen's (2008) idea of transnational literatures. Thomsen views world literature through networks of

relationships that are broader than national literary frameworks. He introduces the idea of literary constellations, configurations of relationships through which literary works can be understood in relation to different cultural and historical networks. A work therefore does not have to be placed exclusively within one national tradition; it can be read through the relationships and circulation that shaped it.

This concept is important for this study because Megat presents a historical space that does not fully correspond to the map of modern states. Johor, Melaka, Riau, the Riau Islands, Singapore, and Lingga were not culturally separate spaces in Malay history. Trade, politics, genealogy, language, religion, and human mobility formed networks connecting these areas. Therefore, the transnationality of Megat is not measured mainly by how often characters move from one country to another, but by how the novel constructs a cultural space that historically predates modern national borders. This relational view is consistent with scholarship that understands memory as mobile and mediated rather than fixed within one territory (Erll, 2011b; Velicu, 2011). In this study, transnationality is used in three dimensions. First, spatial transnationality, namely the representation of Malay territories across modern geopolitical boundaries. Second, identity transnationality, namely the construction of Malay identity that is not determined entirely by citizenship. Third, historical transnationality, namely an understanding of history as a shared experience that cannot simply be divided into Indonesian or Malaysian history.

The Malay World as a Transnational Space

Applying transnational theory to Megat requires an understanding that the concept of the "Malay world" is not identical to the territory of any particular state. Historically, the Malay region was formed through networks of interaction that were much wider than contemporary territorial borders. Andaya (2008) shows that identity and social relationships in the region developed through dynamic processes of interaction. The Strait of Melaka became a meeting ground for different groups of people, trading networks, and processes of identity formation. Ethnic and political categories in the region therefore cannot simply be projected onto modern states.

This understanding allows the Malay world to be seen as a relational space. What connects it is not only a shared territory but also networks created through mobility, language, trade, marriage, religion, kingdoms, and cultural exchange. In such a framework, Johor cannot be rigidly separated from Melaka, Riau, Lingga, Bintan, or other areas around the Strait of Melaka. The idea of transnational space also helps explain why a narrative centered on the history of Johor can be relevant to readers in both Indonesia and Malaysia. What operates within it is not merely geographical movement but the continuity of memory and cultural identity.

In other words, the transnationality of Megat is not simply a question of "where the story takes place," but of "what historical and cultural networks make the story possible." In this context, Megat can be placed as a novel that reimagines the Malay world as a cultural space across countries. The Indonesia-Malaysia border is a contemporary geopolitical reality, but it does not by itself erase historical relationships formed earlier. The novel becomes a medium through which these relationships can be brought back to life through narrative.

The term "transnational Malay world" in this study therefore refers to an imagined and historical space built through Malay networks that extend beyond modern state borders. The concept is important for reading Megat because the novel does not only tell a story about the past; it also performs cultural work by "reconnecting spaces that appear separate from the perspective of the nation-state.

Collective Memory and Cultural Memory

If transnational theory explains spaces and networks that extend beyond the state, Memory Studies helps explain how the past remains alive in social consciousness. The concept of collective memory begins from the idea that memory of the past does not belong only to individuals. Memory is also formed, maintained, and passed on by social groups. In the development of memory studies, Jan Assmann (2011) made an important contribution through the concept of cultural memory. Assmann explains that people relate to the past through interaction with others as well as through external systems such as writing, which allows knowledge and memory to move beyond a single generation.

The theory distinguishes between communicative memory and cultural memory. Communicative memory concerns experiences that remain within the reach of everyday communication and intergenerational contact, while cultural memory concerns symbolic forms that allow knowledge of the past to survive over a longer period. Texts, rituals, symbols, and other forms of cultural objectification allow a community to maintain a relationship with a past that is far beyond the direct experience of the present generation. This distinction has become an important foundation in the study of cultural memory.

The concept is highly relevant to the reading of Megat. The events underlying the story, especially the tragedy of Sultan Mahmud Syah II and Megat Seri Rama, are far beyond the direct experience of contemporary society. Yet these events remain present through historical texts, traditions, stories, genealogies, and later through the novel. Megat can therefore be understood as one medium of cultural memory that brings the past into the horizon of contemporary readers.

Assmann's (2011) ideas also broaden the discussion of how societies select, preserve, activate, and reinterpret the past. In his discussion of canon and archive, for example, active memory refers to parts of the past that continue to be given relevance in the present, while the archive stores materials from the past that are not necessarily always present in public awareness. This distinction is important for reading Megat because the novel can be seen as a process of reactivating a past that had previously remained within historiography or the cultural archive.

When Megat Seri Rama is brought back into a contemporary literary work, he is not simply "remembered." He is given new meaning. Events once understood through ideas such as treason, power, loyalty, and murder can be reread through questions of justice, identity, history, and relations between generations. Cultural memory in this study is therefore not understood as a complete reproduction of the past. Memory is a process of selection, reconstruction, and reinterpretation. The past enters the present through the needs and perspectives of those who remember it. Historical novels such as Megat therefore have an important position: they do not merely "store" history but also take part in determining how history is remembered.

Malay Memory as Transnational Memory

Bringing transnational theory and Memory Studies together allows this study to develop an operational concept, namely transnational Malay memory. The concept refers to memories of the Malay past that do not stop at one national territory but circulate through a cultural space now divided among several countries. This is important because a memory can have a geographical space different from the political space in which it exists.

Memory of the Johor-Riau Sultanate, for example, does not belong only to communities living within the present territorial boundaries of Johor or Riau in the Riau Islands. It can form part of a cultural heritage that is claimed, shared, interpreted, and negotiated by Malay communities in different regions. Within this framework, Megat can be read as a text doing two things at once. First, the novel crosses geographical borders by connecting Malay spaces that are now located in different countries. Second, it crosses temporal boundaries by connecting the past of the Johor-Riau Sultanate with present-day subjects and readers.

Transnationality and memory therefore meet at one point: both allow something separated by space or time to be connected again. On this basis, the study uses four analytical indicators for reading Megat: (1) representation of Malay space across countries; (2) mobility and relationships among spaces; (3) reconstruction of historical figures and events as cultural memory; and (4) negotiation of Malay identity between cultural identity and modern state borders. These four indicators provide the basis for reading the novel's narrative, dialogue, characters, and representations of space.

With this framework, the title "When History Refuses a Passport" is not merely a rhetorical metaphor. It becomes a theoretical proposition: history and Malay cultural memory in Megat move through a space wider than the national borders that were formed later. States can draw borders, but literature can reconnect memories located on both sides of those borders.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive-interpretive method to examine the construction of transnationality and collective memory in Rida K. Liamsi's *Megat* (2016). A qualitative approach was selected because the study focuses on interpreting a literary text, particularly how narrative, dialogue, characters, representations of space, and historical events construct an image of the Malay world beyond the boundaries of modern nation-states. The analytical framework combines Transnational Literary Studies, especially the work of Paul Jay (2021) and Mads Rosendahl Thomsen (2008), with Memory Studies, particularly Jan Assmann's (2011) concept of cultural memory. The two perspectives are used together: transnational literary theory is used to identify and interpret representations of space, mobility, relationships among regions, and identity beyond national borders, while the cultural memory perspective is used to analyze how Malay historical events, figures, and experiences are brought back, passed on, and negotiated in a contemporary narrative.

The primary data source is Rida K. Liamsi's Megat, published by Sagang Intermedia Pers in 2016 (Liamsi, 2016). The research data consist of textual units relevant to the focus of the study, both narrative passages and dialogue between

characters. The data include representations of Malay spaces and territories, particularly relationships among Johor, Melaka, Riau, the Riau Islands, Singapore, and other Malay areas; narratives of character movement and mobility; dialogue representing Malay identity and consciousness; representations of historical events and figures, particularly Megat Seri Rama and Sultan Mahmud Syah II, represented through the character Megat, who is a descendant of Megat Sri Rama, and Adinda, who is a descendant of Sultan Mahmud Syah II; as well as passages showing processes of remembering, passing on, questioning, or reinterpreting Malay history. Secondary sources consist of books, journal articles, and scholarly works relevant to transnational literature, the history of the Malay world, and studies of collective and cultural memory, which are used to strengthen the theoretical and historical context of the study.

Data were collected through close reading of the entire novel. The reading was repeated to identify, select, and record textual passages related to the indicators of transnationality and cultural memory. The data were then classified into four analytical categories: (1) representation of Malay space across countries, (2) mobility and relationships among spaces, (3) reconstruction of historical figures and events as cultural memory, and (4) negotiation of Malay identity between cultural identity and modern state borders. Each item of data was recorded together with its narrative context and page number in the edition of the novel used so that the relationship between textual evidence and interpretation could be traced academically.

The data were analyzed interpretively in three stages. First, the data were reduced and grouped according to their relevance to the four analytical categories. Second, the data were interpreted using transnational literary and cultural memory perspectives. At this stage, representations of space and mobility were read to see how the novel constructs relationships across national borders, while representations of historical figures and events were analyzed to reveal processes of cultural memory formation and negotiation. Third, the interpretations from the different categories were compared and synthesized to identify patterns showing the relationship between transnationality and collective memory.

The analysis was directed not only at showing that characters or events in the novel move across regions, but also at explaining how spatial mobility, historical continuity, and cultural memory work together to construct the Malay world as a transnational space. The interpretation therefore moves from textual evidence to conceptual meaning and then to an argument about Megat as a transnational Malay historical novel.

The validity of the data was maintained through source and theoretical triangulation. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing primary data from the novel with relevant secondary sources on Johor-Riau history, the Malay world, and previous studies of Megat. Theoretical triangulation was conducted by reading the same data through two complementary perspectives, transnational literature and cultural memory. In addition, the validity of the interpretation was maintained through repeated readings of the context of the data so that quotations or textual passages were not separated from the overall narrative structure. Reliability was pursued through consistency in data collection, categorization, and interpretation based on analytical indicators established at the beginning of the study. Through these procedures, the interpretation does not depend solely on the researcher's subjective impression but can

be traced back to textual evidence, analytical categories, and the theoretical framework used.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

Reading Megat shows that the Malay world in the novel is constructed as a cultural space that extends beyond the borders of modern nation-states. The findings reveal five main patterns: (1) representation of Malay space across countries, (2) mobility and relationships among spaces, (3) reconstruction of history as cultural memory, (4) negotiation of Malay identity, and (5) the relationship between past and present. These five patterns do not stand separately but work together to form an image of the Malay world as a historical, genealogical, cultural, and memory-based network.
Main findings:

Reading *Megat* shows that the Malay world in the novel is constructed as a cultural space that extends beyond the borders of modern nation-states. The findings reveal five main patterns, summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Patterns of the Transnational Malay World in Megat

No.	Pattern	Narrative elements	Textual evidence	Pages	Significance
1	Cross-border Malay space	Bentan, Johor, Melaka, Pahang, Riau, and other Malay areas	"I intend to change history. I will move the throne of Johor back to Bentan, to its place of origin"	2, 4, 6, 11, 65–66	Malay regions form one historical network; Bentan is the origin of Sang Nila Utama, Temasek, Melaka, and Parameswara
2	Mobility and relationships among spaces	Journeys from Tanjungpinang to Johor and Melaka; Riau communities in Melaka	Participation in "Tracing the Historical Sites of the Johor Kingdom"	40–62	Characters' movement reconnects spaces now divided by national borders
3	History as cultural memory	Megat Seri Rama, Sultan Mahmud, historical sites, seminars, Adinda's research	Adinda's research on "Megat Sri Rama's Rebellion and the End of a Dynasty"	24, 40, 61, 67–69	The past is preserved and reinterpreted through research and commemoration
4	Negotiation of Malay identity	The title Tengku, the Malay language, genealogy, descent from the Melaka sultans	Adinda introduces herself as "Tengku Adinda" and realises the title's meaning in the Malay community of Melaka	45, 48–49, 68	Identity is rooted in genealogy and language rather than citizenship
5	Past and present	Sultan Mahmud's curse; Megat Ismail's condition	"I curse you, Megat, for seven generations... Let your descendants vomit blood if they set foot in Kota Tinggi!"	24, 39, 68–69	Historical events continue to shape contemporary characters' experience

Note. Page numbers refer to Liamsi (2016).

As Table 1 shows, these five patterns do not stand separately but work together to form an image of the Malay world as a historical, genealogical, cultural, and memory-based network. Bentan, Johor, and Melaka are linked through a shared genealogy of rulers (Liamsi, 2016, pp. 4, 6), while the characters' journeys from the Riau Islands reactivate these connections in the present (p. 40). Adinda's research (p. 67) and her awareness of the title *Tengku* (p. 45) show that memory and identity are inherited through lineage. Sultan Mahmud's curse reappears in Adinda's concern about Megat Ismail after his journey to Kota Tinggi (pp. 24, 39). Thus, *Megat* does not merely use history as a background for the story. History becomes a narrative mechanism connecting space, people, genealogy, identity, and memory across national borders.

The first finding can be seen in the relationship among Bentan, Johor, Melaka, Pahang, and other Malay regions. Megat Seri Rama states, "I intend to change history. I will move the throne of Johor back to Bentan, to its place of origin" (Liamsi, 2016, p. 4). This statement is expanded through the narrative about Bentan as the point of origin of Sang Nila Utama, Temasek, Melaka, and Parameswara (Liamsi, 2016, p. 6). The second finding appears through the characters' journeys from the Riau Islands to Johor and Melaka, including participation in "Tracing the Historical Sites of the Johor Kingdom" (Liamsi, 2016, p. 40). The third finding can be seen in the relationship among historical research, historical sites, and contemporary life. Adinda, for example, conducts research on "Megat Sri Rama's Rebellion and the End of a Dynasty" (Liamsi, 2016, p. 67). The fourth finding concerns identity marked through titles, language, and genealogy. Adinda introduces herself as "Tengku Adinda" and realizes that the title has a particular meaning in the Malay community of Melaka (Liamsi, 2016, p. 45). The fifth finding can be seen in the continuing presence of history in the experience of contemporary characters. Sultan Mahmud's curse, "I curse you, Megat, for seven generations... Let your descendants vomit blood if they set foot in Kota Tinggi!" reappears in Adinda's questions about Megat Ismail's condition after his journey to Johor and Kota Tinggi (Liamsi, 2016, pp. 24, 39).

These five findings show that Megat does not merely use history as a background for the story. History becomes a narrative mechanism connecting space, people, genealogy, identity, and memory across national borders.

Discussion

The Malay World as a Transnational Space

A transnational literary perspective allows Megat to be read beyond the framework of a historical novel centered on one country. Paul Jay explains that transnational literary studies pay attention to mobility, borders, migration, identity, and history, while also questioning approaches to literature that are too closely tied to nation-states (Jay, 2021). Thomsen (2008), meanwhile, places transnational literature within networks of exchange and relationships that extend beyond national frameworks. In Megat, this construction appears from the historical layer in which Megat Seri Rama speaks about moving the Johor throne to Bentan: "I intend to change history. I will move the throne of Johor back to Bentan, to its place of origin" (Liamsi, 2016, p. 4). This sentence is important because Bentan is not treated simply as a geographical location. It is positioned as a place of origin, a source of legitimacy, and a genealogical point in Malay history. The construction becomes clearer when the

narrative connects Bentan with Sang Nila Utama, Temasek, Melaka, and Parameswara, as Megat Sri Rama says, "Parameswara came from Bentan and took his fortune..." (Liamsi, 2016, p. 6).

The Malay space in Megat is therefore relational. Bentan gains meaning through its relationship with Melaka; Johor gains meaning through its relationship with Bentan; and these areas are then connected with other Malay regions. This view is consistent with Andaya (2008), who shows that ethnic identity in the Strait of Melaka is an ongoing process and that group boundaries change according to historical and social relationships. The "Malay world" in Megat is therefore not identical to the territory of a particular state. It is better understood as a network of spaces formed through historical and cultural relationships.

This becomes particularly clear in the scene "Southern Dialogue III," where participants from Melaka, Johor, Pahang, and Terengganu meet representatives from Riau, Jambi, Palembang, West Sumatra, North Sumatra, Singapore, and Brunei Darussalam. The forum is even called a meeting of the "Malay Kindred States" (Liamsi, 2016, pp. 65, 66). The novel thus presents two layers of transnationality. The first lies in the period of the kingdoms, when modern political borders were not yet the main framework of identity. The second lies in the present, when territories that have become parts of different states are connected again through seminars, research, travel, and cultural activities. Megat therefore performs what can be called a "transnational reimagining of the Malay world."

Mobility and Networks among Malay Spaces

If space provides the transnational framework, the mobility of the characters brings the network to life. Jay (2021) specifically includes mobility as an important category in transnational literary studies. In Megat, mobility is not only geographical movement but also a way of activating history. This can be seen when Megat Ismail and several officials, cultural figures, and historians from the Riau Islands are invited to Johor to participate in "Tracing the Historical Sites of the Johor Kingdom" (Liamsi, 2016, p. 40). Movement from the Riau Islands to Johor in the present is also a journey into the past. The characters do not simply move from one place to another; they enter spaces that hold a shared history.

The relationship develops into wider mobility. Megat contacts Adinda from Johor Bahru and says, "After the event, Bang Megat will go straight to Melaka" (Liamsi, 2016, p. 40). They also share an experience of traveling in Kota Bharu, Kelantan (Liamsi, 2016, p. 41). The characters' movements therefore form a geographical network of Johor, Melaka, Kelantan, and Riau.

What is interesting is that this network is not limited to intellectuals or cultural figures. The novel also presents the mobility of ordinary people. Mahkota Hospital in Melaka is described as a place visited by many patients from Riau: "This is a hospital for Riau people," one character says, because most of the patients who come for treatment are from Riau (Liamsi, 2016, p. 47). The narrative then mentions Pekanbaru, Tanjungpinang, and Batam as places of origin for patients coming to Melaka (Liamsi, 2016, p. 47).

This scene is important because it broadens the meaning of transnationality. Malay connections do not exist only in historical discourse or cultural seminars; they

also appear in everyday mobility. Megat therefore shows that modern national borders do not erase the social and cultural networks that have developed in the Malay region. Human mobility is one way these networks continue to be produced.

Megat Seri Rama and the Production of Cultural Memory

While the transnational perspective explains relationships among spaces, Assmann's (2011) theory of cultural memory helps explain why the past continues to matter in the present. Assmann views cultural memory as a form of memory that can be maintained through different media and passed on beyond the direct experience of a generation. Memory does not simply store information about the past; it also contributes to cultural identity.

In Megat, the history of Megat Seri Rama and Sultan Mahmud is a memory that continues to be activated. One mechanism is the exploration of historical sites. Megat Ismail is invited to take part in "Tracing the Historical Sites of the Johor Kingdom" (Liamsi, 2016, p. 40). Historical sites therefore function as a medium that brings the present into contact with the past.

The second mechanism is Adinda's academic research. She attends the seminar because she is studying the History of the Nusantara and is developing a dissertation entitled "Megat Sri Rama's Rebellion and the End of a Dynasty" (Liamsi, 2016, p. 67). History does not remain only as a story passed down through generations; it becomes part of research, seminars, and knowledge production.

The third mechanism is the novel itself. Adinda reads the draft of the novel "MEGAT" given to her by Megat Ismail (Liamsi, 2016, p. 31). There is therefore a layered process in the production of memory: historical event → research → novel → reading → reinterpretation by the present generation. At this point, Megat can be understood as a medium of cultural memory. The novel does not merely tell what happened in the past; it brings back questions about what the past means for contemporary society. Assmann's (2011) concept is relevant because cultural memory works through symbolic forms that allow the past to remain present in social life.

Malay Identity, Genealogy, and the Negotiation of Memory

Transnationality in Megat is also built through identity. Malay identity is not presented as a finished and uniform category, but through names, titles, language, genealogy, and historical knowledge. Andaya (2008) emphasizes that ethnic identity is an ongoing process and that group boundaries can change historically.

An example appears when Adinda introduces herself: "Oh yes, my name is Adinda," ... "Tengku Adinda...." (Liamsi, 2016, p. 45). She then explains that the use of "Tengku" is important because many people in Melaka are named Adinda and the title has a particular resonance in the Malay community (Liamsi, 2016, p. 45). The title therefore becomes both a marker of identity and a marker of a person's position within the Malay cultural network.

This identity becomes more complex when Adinda encounters genealogical history. The narrative states, "Perhaps because she believes that she is descended from Malay nobility ... still descended from the Sultans of Melaka as well" (Liamsi, 2016, p. 68). The question then develops into whether she is really a descendant of Melaka and

whether she might instead be a descendant of Sultan Mahmud, who was killed by Megat Seri Rama (Liamsi, 2016, p. 68).

Here genealogy functions as a form of memory. Bloodline, family, and descent become ways of connecting individuals in the present with the history of the kingdom. But genealogy also creates an identity problem when Adinda realizes that Megat is a descendant of the side historically regarded as her family's enemy. She even worries that she may be accused of "betraying them by marrying a descendant of their enemy" (Liamsi, 2016, p. 68).

This issue shows that cultural memory does not always produce a harmonious identity. It can be a source of attachment as well as conflict. The relationship between Adinda and Megat Ismail shows that people in the present inherit history but also have the possibility of negotiating it again.

When History Refuses a Passport: From Historical Memory to Transnational Malay Memory

The most important finding of this reading is that the transnationality of Megat does not stop at representations of space and mobility. The novel connects these spaces through historical memory. The concept that can be used to bring the findings together is transnational Malay memory, namely memory of Malay history, figures, spaces, genealogy, and culture that is produced and passed on beyond the borders of modern nation-states.

The relationship between past and present provides the clearest evidence. Sultan Mahmud once cursed Megat: "I curse you, Megat, for seven generations... Let your descendants vomit blood if they set foot in Kota Tinggi!" (Liamsi, 2016, p. 24). Centuries later, Adinda asks about Megat Ismail's condition: "Did he really cough up blood? Was it because he went to Johor and Kota Tinggi?" (Liamsi, 2016, p. 39). These two quotations form a narrative bridge between the period of the kingdom and contemporary life. The curse from the past gains a possible new meaning through the experience of a contemporary character. History therefore does not end as chronology; it becomes memory that continues to work. The novel also gives an explicit reflection on the relationship between past and future: "There is no present without the past. There is no future without the present, and history is the mirror in which we see the journey of a nation" (Liamsi, 2016, pp. 68–69). This statement functions as a kind of hermeneutic key to the novel. The past is not something finished; it is a source for understanding present identity and possible futures. In Assmann's (2011) theoretical framework, this function is consistent with the idea that cultural memory does not merely preserve the past but allows communities to build identity and respond to present concerns.

At the same time, Jay's (2021) transnational perspective helps explain that this memory is not locked within one country. The historical spaces appearing in the novel—Bentan, Johor, Melaka, Riau, Pahang, Kelantan, and other Malay regions—form a network that is older and wider than modern states.

The metaphor "history refuses a passport" can therefore be understood analytically. A passport is a symbol of modern citizenship that distinguishes people according to states. The memory constructed in Megat, by contrast, moves through genealogy, language, history, culture, mobility, and emotional relationships. These elements all extend beyond the category of citizenship.

From this perspective, Megat does not merely reconstruct Malay history; it transnationalizes Malay historical memory. Johor's history is not only the history of Johor; it is connected with Bentan and Riau. Melaka is not only the history of a Malaysian region; it becomes part of a memory also maintained by communities in other parts of the Malay region. Similarly, Megat Seri Rama is not only a figure in Johor history; he is reactivated through research, novels, seminars, historical journeys, and relations between generations.

This finding also distinguishes the present study from readings of Megat that place it simply as a historical novel or as a novel with intertextual relationships to Malay historiography. The focus here shows that the reconstruction of history in the novel has a further function: it rebuilds an image of the connected Malay world beyond modern nation-state borders.

Thus, the transnationality of Megat does not lie mainly in the number of countries appearing in the story, but in the way the novel connects space, mobility, memory, genealogy, identity, and affection within one cultural network. This is where the historical novel becomes a medium for producing transnational Malay memory. This reading is also supported by Sari's (2022) discussion of narrative structure, particularly the way events are arranged and connected to produce meaning. In Megat, historical events are similarly organized through characters, memories, genealogies, and movements between places. The novel therefore presents history not as an isolated chronology, but as a narrative structure through which the continuity of the Malay world can be understood across geographical and temporal boundaries.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that Rida K. Liamsi's Megat is not simply a historical novel that brings back the story of Megat Seri Rama and Sultan Mahmud Syah II. More broadly, the novel constructs the Malay world as a historical and cultural space that extends beyond the borders of modern nation-states. Bentan, Johor, Melaka, the Riau Islands, Pahang, Kelantan, and other Malay areas do not appear as separate geographical points but as nodes in a network of history, mobility, genealogy, identity, and memory.

In other words, the novel shows that Malay history had already been "traveling" long before modern states began putting up fences and asking for passports. The findings also show that transnationality in Megat cannot be understood simply through the movement of characters from one region to another. The mobility of Megat Ismail and Tengku Adinda, encounters among Malay cultures, journeys between Riau, Johor, Melaka, and Kelantan, and even the movement of Riau residents seeking medical treatment in Melaka show that relationships among Malay spaces continue in both social life and cultural memory. Meanwhile, the reconstruction of Megat Seri Rama, Sultan Mahmud II, historical sites, seminars, academic research, and the writing of the novel shows that the past continues to be produced as a living memory in the present.

The main contribution of this study lies in the operational concept of transnational Malay memory, namely memory of Malay history, figures, spaces, genealogy, and culture that continues to be produced, passed on, and negotiated beyond nation-state borders. Through this concept, Megat can be read not only as a text that remembers the past but also as a text that works on the past: selecting, connecting, bringing it to life, and reinterpreting Malay history in relation to present identity.

Thus, a historical novel is not only a "museum" where the past is displayed but also a "courtroom" where the past is examined again. The implications of this study extend the understanding of contemporary Malay literature, especially historical novels, by showing that the national category is not always sufficient to explain Malay cultural experience and imagination.

A transnational reading allows Malay history to be seen as a network across regions and generations. In this context, literature has an important role in preserving cultural memory that may be divided by geopolitical borders, while also opening the possibility of reading Malay identity in a more dialogic way rather than confining it to modern citizenship.

In the end, Megat presents an interesting paradox: states need passports to regulate people's movement, but history has never needed a passport to move from one generation to the next. This is where the meaning of "When History Refuses a Passport" finds its basis. The novel reminds us that before Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and modern administrative borders existed, there were already networks of people, languages, kingdoms, trade, genealogy, and culture that were connected to one another. Reading Megat transnationally therefore does not mean erasing state borders, but recognizing that those borders are not the only way to understand Malay history and identity. Wallahu A'lam.

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