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Tropic Fever and *Merantau ke Deli*, Malay historiography counter of the promised land Deli East Sumatra

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Abstract*: This study critically examines representations of Malay sovereignty in Ladislas Székely's Tropic Fever and HAMKA's Merantau ke Deli, focusing on how the two works portray Deli, East Sumatra, and challenge its prevailing image as the "Promised Land." It explores representations of power, social relations, cultural practices, and Malay identity beyond genealogical and ancestral narratives. Employing a comparative literature approach, the study draws on reception theory and New Historicism. The data comprise textual representations of Malay sultanates, society, culture, territory, and power structures in both works. The findings reveal that the texts construct counter-representations of Deli, challenging its idealized image as a land of prosperity and opportunity. Beneath narratives of human origins, Malay identity, territoriality, and power lies a complex construction of Malay sovereignty and cultural identity. Deli emerges not merely as a space of economic promise but as a contested landscape shaped by competing perspectives on power, social relations, and cultural realities. The interplay between spatial sovereignty and the integrated character of Malay society generates distinctive patterns of power within the Malay world. The study concludes that both works function as literary historiographical texts that challenge the "Promised Land" narrative and illuminate the complex cultural and humanistic realities of Deli.*

Keywords: *historiographical works, counter-representation, sovereignty*

INTRODUCTION

Critical theory brings issues of history, ideology, gender, race, class, and colonialism into the reading and analysis of literary works. Sarwoko (2025), for instance, explicitly argues that the *Theory Wars* have transformed the direction of literary criticism into a more radical and engaged approach, one that is increasingly oriented toward literary works as reflections of the social and cultural conditions of a particular society. Consequently, literary studies have increasingly demonstrated the fluidity of the boundaries separating the study of literature from the study of history and culture.

In line with this perspective, the notion of the Promised Land can be traced back to the seventeenth century. This idea developed alongside the migration of Europeans, particularly the English, to the American continent as a consequence of political and religious conflicts as well as discriminatory practices. In this historical context, they sought guarantees of religious freedom under King James I, as they experienced persecution and oppression. They therefore sought a "New World" where they could freely practice their faith and establish a social system consistent with their religious customs and traditions. The idea of a Promised Land was also articulated earlier by Sir Thomas More in his book *Utopia*, published in the sixteenth century. The work depicts an ideal community that is free from oppressive rulers and material deprivation.

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The concept of the "Promised Land" is also rooted in the mythical tradition of Judaism, referring to the divine promise of a land for the Jewish people. Cornelius Loew (1967) further notes that the land chosen as their place of settlement was associated with Mount Zion, a sacred place regarded as the promised destination of the Jewish people. The notion of an ideal land was subsequently echoed in narratives of imagined worlds. In *Utopia*, for example, people are depicted as living peacefully in an imagined island community, which is described as having been discovered by a group of people under the leadership of "Americus Vespuccius."

The attractiveness of North Sumatera is bordered by Aceh to the north, West Sumatera and Riau to the South, the Strait of Malacca to the East, and the Indian Ocean to the Wesat. Much of its land has traditionally been used by local communities for agriculture and the cultivation of food crops and other commodities. The western and eastern parts of North Sumatyera are separated by the Bukit Barisan mountain range. The lowlands generally have a hot climate, while the highlands and mountainous area have a cooler climate. The eastern part of North Sumatera, commonly known as east Sumatera, was also characterized by extensive rubber and oil-palm plantations. The emergence of these plantation can be traced to the Dutch colonial period. Since many of the plantation were owned by foreigners, their development brought significant social and cultural changes to East Sumatera. The surrounding region subsequently became known as Deli because of its extensive tobacco plantation, which produced the renowed Deli tobacco. Deli tobacco became internationally famous, and Deli itself came to be known as "the land of Dollars".

Furthermore, based on the view that literary works constitute documents of social and cultural life, the concept of the "Promised Land" is not limited to, nor did it occur exclusively in, the regions described above. Rather, the phenomenon of the "Promised Land" also emerged in Deli, in present-day North Sumatra, historically known as East Sumatra. Deli was once regarded as a promising land, attracting people from both the East and the West who came to the region in search of opportunities, prosperity, and a better life.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the "Introduction to the Third Edition" of *Merantau ke Deli* (1928), HAMKA acknowledges that the material and creative ideas for the work were derived from his observations while serving as a religious teacher in the plantation areas of Deli, East Sumatra. HAMKA further explains that the work primarily portrays the relationship between two individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Similarly, Ladislas Székely's *Tropic Fever* (1910) was written on the basis of his experiences while working as a plantation employee in Deli. Consequently, Székely's work provides a relatively candid account of the conditions he encountered in his workplace. He portrays the racial discrimination imposed by the white colonial community and the suffering experienced by Javanese plantation workers.

In addition, M. H. Székely-Lulofs, the wife of Ladislas Székely, wrote a work originally entitled *Rubber* (1933), which was later translated into Indonesian under the title *Berpacu Nasib di Kebun Karet* (1933). The work vividly depicts Deli as a site of exploitation in which white colonial interests pursued wealth and economic gain. Having been raised in a plantation environment and married to a plantation employee,

Lulofs had a close understanding of the social realities that surrounded her. Like *Tropic Fever*, her work portrays the suffering of indigenous plantation workers, including their extreme responses to oppressive conditions and their plans to kill white plantation employees.

Furthermore, Razali (2021), in his study of Ladislas Székely's *Tropic Fever*, demonstrates that the myth of the "Promised Land" succeeded in attracting workers from various parts of the world to Deli. However, the promise of the Promised Land was enjoyed by only a small proportion of the newcomers, particularly plantation owners, overseers, and traders. For the majority of migrants, by contrast, the Promised Land offered little improvement in their lives. Their employment on the plantations did not alleviate their poverty; rather, it merely transferred their poverty from Java to Deli. They were subjected to cruel and inhumane treatment that, in some cases, they might not have experienced in their places of origin. Thus, for these workers, the notion of the "Promised Land" was deeply ironic: instead of the better fortune they had anticipated, they encountered even greater hardship and suffering.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive-interpretative method within the framework of comparative literature. Comparative literature provides the primary methodological approach for examining the similarities, differences, and intertextual relationships between Ladislas Székely's *Tropic Fever* and HAMKA's *Merantau ke Deli*. The comparative approach has developed alongside literary traditions since classical antiquity, particularly through the interaction between Greek and Latin literature (Sarwoko, 2025). In contemporary literary studies, however, comparative literature extends beyond identifying literary similarities and differences to examining how different texts construct, negotiate, and represent particular cultural, historical, and ideological meanings.

The study draws primarily on literary reception theory, complemented by New Historicism. Reception theory provides a framework for understanding how literary meanings are shaped by the relationship between texts, readers, and their historical contexts. In this study, it is used to examine how representations of Deli and Malay sovereignty are constructed and interpreted through the different perspectives embodied in the two literary works. Ratna (2004) emphasizes the humanistic significance of literary studies, particularly their potential to cultivate cultural awareness and revitalize universal human values. Accordingly, the reception perspective allows the study to consider how historical and cultural experiences inform the meanings conveyed through literary representations.

New Historicism complements this framework by situating literary texts within the historical, political, social, and cultural conditions in which their representations become meaningful. Rather than treating literature as an autonomous reflection of reality, this approach considers literary works as cultural texts that interact with historical discourses, social practices, and structures of power. It is therefore particularly relevant to examining the representation of Malay sultanates, territorial sovereignty, social hierarchies, cultural practices, and the changing political landscape of Deli, East Sumatra.

The primary data consist of textual passages from *Tropic Fever* and *Merantau ke Deli* that represent Malay sovereignty and the historical and cultural realities of Deli. These include descriptions, dialogues, narrative episodes, and other textual elements concerning Malay origins and identity, the Malay sultanates, territorial boundaries, social relations, cultural practices, and systems of power. Secondary data comprise relevant scholarly publications, historical accounts, and cultural documents used to contextualize and interpret the representations found in the primary texts.

Data were collected through close reading and systematic documentation. First, both literary works were read repeatedly to identify passages relevant to the research focus. Second, the selected passages were classified according to thematic categories, including Malay identity and origins, sovereignty and territoriality, political authority, social relations, and cultural practices. Third, relevant historical and cultural sources were examined to establish the contexts necessary for interpreting these representations.

The data were analyzed through several interconnected stages. First, each literary work was examined individually to identify its narrative perspective, thematic emphasis, and construction of Malay sovereignty. Second, the selected textual representations were interpreted through the reception perspective, with attention to how historical and cultural positions shape the meanings conveyed by each text. Third, New Historicism was applied to relate these representations to the broader historical discourses and power relations surrounding Deli. Finally, a comparative analysis was conducted to identify convergences, divergences, and contrasting constructions of Deli in the two works. This process enabled the study to examine how the texts reproduce, negotiate, or challenge the idealized representation of Deli as the "Promised Land."

Through this interpretative procedure, the study moves beyond tracing genealogical origins or identifying historical similarities. Instead, it investigates how literary representations construct Malay sovereignty, negotiate cultural identity, and reveal the complex relationships between territory, power, and society in Deli, East Sumatra.

Comparative literature as a theory and literary approach is as old as literature itself. Since classical times, comparative literary studies have developed through comparisons with earlier literary traditions, particularly Latin and Greek literature (Sarwoko, 2025). In the present study, the primary theoretical and methodological framework of comparative literature is literary reception, complemented by the New Historicist approach. In this regard, Ratna (2004) argues that such an approach is closely related to the cultivation of awareness aimed at revitalizing humanistic values and fostering an awareness of universal humanism. Accordingly, the emphasis on reception theory and New Historicism is highly relevant to this study, as both approaches enable the relationship between the past and the reader to be examined more comprehensively and allow the multicultural dimensions embedded in literary works to be explored more fully.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

This section presents the historical background of Deli, North Sumatra, as the so-called "Promised Land," a reputation closely tied to the growth of its plantation economy from the second half of the nineteenth century. Drawing on Mahadi (1978) and Kasim (1998), the discussion traces how the opening of the first tobacco plantation in 1863 set off a rapid expansion of plantations, which in turn generated a growing demand for labor and attracted waves of migrants from both within and outside the archipelago. The development of transportation, particularly the establishment of the Deli Spoorweg Maatschappij railway company in 1883, further widened employment opportunities and strengthened Deli's image as a land of promise. Table 1 summarizes these developments chronologically, covering the key events, the size and origins of the workforce, and the sources from which the data are drawn.

Table 1. Development of Deli as the "Promised Land"

Year	Development	Workers and Migrants	Source
1863	Jacobus Nienhuys opened the first tobacco plantation, which ran successfully	120 workers from China and Penang	Mahadi (1978)
1872	Other plantations followed; 13 plantations were in operation	Recruited from China, India, and the Malay Peninsula	Mahadi (1978)
1883	The railway company Deli Spoorweg Maatschappij (DSM) was established, creating more jobs	More people migrated to the region	Mahadi (1978)
1884	The number of plantations grew further	Recruitment shifted to Java, after Chinese and British regulations burdened plantation owners; Javanese were regarded as hardworking laborers	Mahadi (1978)
1902	Deli became widely known as the "Promised Land"	99,568 plantation workers; Europeans, Chinese, Tamils, Javanese, Minangkabau, Banjar, and Banten migrated to improve their lives	Kasim (1998)

Source: Adapted from Mahadi (1978) and Kasim (1998).

Mahadi (1978) states thar the history of Deli, North Sumatera as "Promised Land", has the relation with the establishment of plantations in the region. Deli was known for its fertile soil and extensive forest which is suitable for tobacco and rubber. From the fist opening of tobacco plantation by Jacobus Nienhuys in 1863 which run successfully. Followed by the opening of other plantations and showed the rapid development. In 1872 there was only 13 plantation, in 1884 the plantation grew more.

Having the rapid development of the plantation, demands of workers also increased. When the fist opening by Nienhuys only supported by 120 workers from China and Penang, later on the workers have to be added. Firstly, the workers are recruited from China, India and Malay Peninsula. However, when the Chinese and British government that have authorised in India and Malay Peninsula made such regulations that burden the owner of the plantation, their attention shifted to Java, a land with a dense population whose inhabitants were widely regarded as hardworking labors.

Alongside the rapid development of plantations, transportation also exapanded. The railway company, Deli Spoorweg Maatschappij (DSM) was established in 1883, creating additional employment opportunities and encouraging even more people to migrate to the region. According to Kasim (1998), by 1902 there were reportedly 99.568 workers employed on plantations. The news about Deli as "Promised land" has spread widely. Many Europeans, Chinese, Tamil and various ethnic groups came to the region. Aside Javanese, other ethnic groups are Minagkabau, Banjar, and Banten which all hope to improve their lives in Deli land, North Sumatera.

Discussion

Deli land has spread far beyond not only the Indonesian archipelago, but also to Europe. Deli has become the tremendous attraction that encourage people to come and for a better life. Hamka's *Merantau ke Deli* potrays this condition,

> *"Suara Deli yang demikianlah yang gemuruh kedengaran kemana-mana ke sekeliling Pulau Sumatera. Itulah yang membawa kaki orang Tapanuli, Minangkabau datang ke Deli sejak Tanah Deli terbuka. Deli itulah yang menyeru orang Amerika Mencari dolar, orang kontrak mencari sepiring mie sekali Sebulan, orang dusun mencari dan mengumpulkan dari setali ke setali." (1965: 10)*
> ["Such was the resounding voice of Deli, echoing far and wide throughout the island of Sumatra. It was this very call that drew people from Tapanuli and Minangkabau to Deli from the time the region was first opened up. Deli was the land that beckoned Americans in pursuit of dollars, contract laborers seeking a plate of noodles once a month, and villagers striving to earn and accumulate wealth, coin by coin." (1965, p. 10)

Similarly, Ladislao Szekely, Tropic Fever (1979) potrays the attraction of Deli land, North Sumatera. The narrator from Hongaria, a small country in Central Europe, also heard about the wide opportunities in Deli land as reflected,

> "He also told me that nowhere in the world were there so many opportunities for work, and that every white man was more than welcome there". (1979: 25)

For white colonial people, Deli was indeed the land full of promise. They were regarded as "superior" race, whereas for people of color, Deli became the physical and psychological hardship. White people are masters and the people of color are "slaves".

> "The first thing I learned in Sumatera was that there two kinds of People in the world: white and colored. The white man is the master, Master and ruler in the strictest sense of the word". (Szekely, 1979: 45)

The story of the brightness of the hope and successfulness of Deli land is also potrayed by Hamka through his protagonist;

Leman. He leaves his hometown in West Sumatera and migrates to Deli. He gained material success as from financial support from his wife, Poniem. He succeeds in establishing a shop that supplies workers' needs and many people works for him. This

luck only experienced by small numbers of indigeneous migrants particularly traders like Leman and plantation supervisors (known as *head laborer)*. In addition receiving higher salaries than ordinary labors, this *head laborer* has authorities given by their masters. Such European, he has the power to take the woman he like to be his mistress. Poniem in *Merantau ke Deli*, before getting married with Leman, in *Tropic Fever* was portrayed as one of the mistress of 'head laborer besar'. Head laborer lives like 'small king' in their respective areas with higher salaries than ordinary workers.

Not all migrants, however has experience the same prosperity as people stated previously. Most lived under extremely difficult conditions. For them, promised Land gives no promise for better works or better wages. Many were deceived into migrating to Deli after being promised good employment and high wages. Upon arrival, what the faced are completely different from what they have been promised.

> "Where was the Promised Land of which the recruiting officers Had told them at home? Where was the gold? And the life?...
> Forest, dense, black forest, swamps, and burnt jungle." (Szekely, 1979: 173)

That story shows 'Tuan Kebon' (Plantation owner) and 'head laborer' (plantation supervisor) have great authorities over the workers. The law does not apply to them. The physical abused done by Tuan Kebon towards the workers caused deeply disappointment in their hearts. So, this is what called "Promised Land" that they face in Deli.

> "So that how the "Promised Land really looked? That was what the wonderful life of adventure really meant? One woman sobbed loud, but head laborer kicked her in the side, and she was quickly silenced." (Szekely, 1979: 174)

Woman workers experienced even more severe forms of suffering. Dehumanization and moral degradation were widespread in plantation area, and the women become the primary victims. They were treated as object that could be transferred from one man to another. Poniem's experiences before her marriage to Leman in Merantau ke Deli, as well as Kartinah's experiences in Tropic fever, illustrate the low social status of women in plantation communities. Upon arriving at the plantation in Deli, women's lives were determined by 'tuan kebon', 'head laborer', or 'centeng'. Merantau ke Deli potrays the low position of women in plantation area.

> *"Beratus-ratus Perempuan yang datang ke kebun, karena tipuan bahwa pekerjaan di kebun itu amat enteng. Tetapi apabila telah sampai di kebun, mereka menangis berurai air mata. Menangis buat selamantya sehari dua hari, sepekan dua pekan, menangisi kehormatannya yang telah hilang." (*1979: 19)
> ["Hundreds of women came to the plantations, deceived by claims that the work there was very easy. However, upon arriving at the plantations, they wept bitterly, their tears flowing uncontrollably. They continued to mourn for days, weeks, and even longer, grieving over the loss of their honor." (1979, p. 19)]

Tropic Fever also potrays the tragic conditions of women in the plantation area.

"Your Tuan wants to have your woman."
Pardi said nothing. The rain fell in torrents.
"Melink, Tuan. I am your servant from the top of my hat
to the toe of my sandals." (Szekely,1979: 156-157)

Male workers are powerless. He can not claimed a woman as his wife, because his wife can easily be taken by 'tuan besar' or 'head laborer'.

Hamka literary work and Szekely's Tropic Fever show that the arrival of people from different racial, ethnic, and cultural background to Deli land, generates cultural conflicts. Leman's marriage with Poniem ended tragically. Leman was unable to resist the tradition of marrying within his own community and eventually accepted a new wife from his hometown. The situation was getting more complicated by the attitude of Mariatun, Leman's new wife who believed that Minangkabau matrilocal traditions should also be implemented in migrant community. Consequently, the household that Leman has built with Poniem through hardship ultimately collapsed.

In Tropic fever, tension is illustrated through an incident involving the measurement of drainage ditches constructed by Chinese workers. The Javanese supervisor and head laborer were unwilling to participate in cheating or cooperate with Chinese workers.

> "And Lim ah Yung tried to vain to conspire with the Java[s] and there should be less measuring. For the less measuring there was the better for him: it meant less work, but identical pay. the Java [s] were not at the moment inclined to have anything to do with illegal matters." (Szekely, 1979: 164)

The conflicting attitudes between the two groups could be observed and exploited by the European plantation owners:

> "The European planters, however, exploit this strained relationship: the Chinese betray the Javans, and the Javans will not allow the Chinese to cheat." (Szekely, 1979: 164)

M.H. Szekely Lulofs' work, Berpacu Nasib di Kebun Karet (1985) also potrays the lives of people working in the plantation areas of Deli. The author's primary focus, however, is on the lives of white plantation employees. Although their works are demanding, for example supervising the clearing of forests for rubber cultivation, their financial compensation was highly favorable. Their salaries were incomparably higher than those received by indigeneous workers. They lived luxurious. In addition to their substantial salaries, received annual bonuses (tantieme) based on the profit generated by the plantation where they worked. For them, "Money fell from the sky", and at the end of each year they could add tens of guilders to their accounts. (Lulofs, 1985: 124). As in Tropic fever, Lulofs potrays racial discrimination in which white people were regarded as first-class citizens while indigenous people were treated as third-class citizens. Railway carriages, for example were devided according to racial categories; first class were reserved for white passengers; second class was designated for Chinese,

Japanese, Arabs, and 'nyai'; while third class was assigned to indigenous, Javanese, Malays, and Batak people (1985: 31).

Yet, as potrayed in Tropic Fever (1979, 46) some of the white people regarded as first-class citizens could have been criminals or fugitives. For them, Deli was indeed a "paradise". Lulofs works also potrays Deli as fertile economic environment for Japanese women who are willing to live in plantation areas and enter relationship with white plantation owners. Their circumstances were nevertheless considerably better than those of indigenous 'nyai', as they were not treated as slaves by white plantation owner.

Another social problem affecting many indigenous workers was the widespread practice of gambling. This phenomenon further intensified their hardship. Plantation authorities tolerated and appeared to encourage gambling among workers. From their perspective, workers who lost their wages through gambling were more likely to renew their employment contracts. As a result, amny workers remained tied to the plantation system from year to year.

Hamka (1965: 8,21) describes gambling as a common activity among workers after receiving their wages, both the smaller mid-month payment and the larger payment at the end of the month. Lulofs (1985: 178) similarly potrays the spread of gambling and its consequences for indigenous worker.

> *"Kutukan Deli, " kata John, "perjudian itu."*
> *"Tapi mengapa diizinkan?"*
> *"Mengapa?" John tersenyum sinis. "karena harus diadakan daya tarik untuk kuli-kuli ini. Dan dengan demikian mereka mudah saja gajinya habis. Kalau mereka menabung sesudah selesai kontrak mereka kembali ke jawa. Kalau mereka tidak menabung, mereka teken kontrak lagi. Itu lebih mudah bagi perkebunan daripada tiap kali mendatangkan kuli-kuli baru.*
> ["The curse of Deli," said John, "is gambling."
> "But why is it permitted?"
> "Why?" John smiled cynically. "Because these laborers need to be provided with some form of entertainment. This makes it easy for them to spend their wages. If they save their money, they will return to Java once their contracts expire. If they fail to save, they will sign another contract. That is much easier for the plantation companies than having to recruit new laborers every time."]

CONCLUSION

The work of M. H. Székely-Lulofs vividly depicts how Deli became a site of exploitation in the pursuit of wealth by white colonial interests. Having been raised in a plantation environment and married to a plantation employee, Lulofs had an intimate understanding of the social realities and conditions that prevailed in her surroundings. Her work was first published in 1933. Like *Tropic Fever*, it portrays the suffering of indigenous plantation workers and depicts their desperation to the extent that they contemplated killing white plantation employees.

Workers from various parts of the world came to Deli, East Sumatra, in search of employment and a better life. However, the promise of the "Promised Land" was enjoyed by only a small proportion of these newcomers, particularly plantation owners, head laborer, and traders. For the majority of migrants, by contrast, the Promised Land

offered little improvement in their lives. Working on the plantations did not improve their socioeconomic conditions; rather, it merely transferred their poverty from Java to Deli. They were subjected to cruel and inhumane treatment that, in some cases, they might not have experienced in their places of origin. Consequently, for these workers, the notion of the "Promised Land" was deeply ironic: instead of the prosperity and better fortune they had anticipated, they encountered even greater hardship and suffering.

In contemporary perspective, friendship and its activities should not remain live only in the historical and cultural experiences of the past. Rather, each generation must have the courage to write a new chapter in relations among nations. This perspective entails an awareness that diplomacy is not merely a matter of meetings among experts and scholars or the signing of cooperation agreements.

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