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REVIEW ARTICLE

Malaysian Culture in the Paintings of the *Koleksi Cerita Siti* by Siti Zainon Ismail

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ABSTRACT

The study aims to identify the cultural aspects embedded in the illustrations of *Koleksi Cerita Siti*, a work by Ismail (2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d). This children's poetry collection, which comprises four titles—*Kebun Rama-rama*, *Kampung Pulau Kelapa*, *Rumah Semut Kuala Abai*, and *Mimpi Si Ikan Kaloi*—features illustrations with strong Malay cultural motifs. These illustrations carry implicit meanings intended to convey education and advice to readers, particularly children, regarding Malay culture. An analysis of the illustrations in these four books reveals several elements of Malay culture, including the Culture of Welcoming Guests, the Culture of Seeking Knowledge, the Culture of Traditional Attire, and the Culture of Sitting Cross-legged While Eating. These cultural aspects, as depicted in *Koleksi Cerita Siti*, have long been practiced by the Malay community as part of their social life. It is crucial for today's younger generation to be aware of these traditions to ensure they are not lost over time. Therefore, a focused study on the cultural aspects in the illustrations of this literary work is necessary so that children who read it can understand and learn about their cultural heritage, fostering a strong sense of identity as part of the Malay community.

Contribution/Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature by exploring how Malay cultural values are embedded in children's picture book illustrations. This study is one of very few studies which have investigated visual cultural representation in Malaysian children's literature. This study documents how illustrations can serve as tools for cultural preservation.

1. Introduction

The creation of children's literature is an interpretation by the author in delivering education by stimulating the reader's creative thinking to explore and learn new things that can bring benefits to life. According to Zakeria and Affendi (2016), literary works are the result of an author's sensitivity to the environment, conveying lessons about society

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and its way of thinking. This understanding can also be applied in literary works to attract young readers by incorporating illustrated elements and vibrant colors.

Additionally, Arumugan et al. (2021) argue that the depiction of images in children's picture books is crucial, as the illustrations interact with the text. Images, pictures, and visuals are highly effective in conveying ideas. This underscores that literary elements and illustrations can drive and communicate ideas that captivate children's interest and encourage them to learn new concepts, including cultural elements.

Accordingly, elements of Malay cultural heritage have been passed down from generation to generation with the aim of shaping the identity of society as a civilized nation and serving as a symbol of its personality, etiquette, and intellectual capacity. The cultural practices of the Malay community are daily habits carried out collectively, becoming traditions over time. According to Basri et al. (2019), Malay culture encompasses the entire way of life inherited by the Malay community over the decades. It successfully establishes the Malay identity as a continuous ethnic group across the Malay Archipelago, including Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, Patani, and the Sulu and Mindanao islands in the Philippines. This suggests that the widespread Malay community has been unified through cultural practices, as seen in aspects such as religion, clothing, food, and more.

Generally, efforts to preserve cultural heritage require methods and mediums as recording tools to ensure future generations can understand and appreciate Malay heritage. Therefore, the introduction of cultural practices should also be taught through literature and illustrations, providing a visual reference for new readers, particularly children. Sultan et al. (2016) states that drawings and sketches allow children not only to imitate for better understanding but also to respond to the forms of illustrations. Thus, it can be said that illustrations significantly impact children's emotions and help them retain and learn new information more effectively. In line with this, Malaysia's 14th National Laureate, Ismail (2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d), has produced a collection of children's poetry books that emphasize various aspects of cultural heritage through both writing and illustrations. *Koleksi Cerita Siti* consists of four poetry books: *Rumah Semut Kuala Abai*, *Kampung Pulau Kelapa*, *Kebun Rama-rama*, and *Mimpi Si Ikan Kaloi*.

1.1. Research Problem

This study originates from statements made by several local scholars regarding the cultural heritage practices of the Malay community. According to Musa and Rahman (2010), a study conducted on society in this country found that some believe traditional culture and values can hinder development and lead to stagnation. However, Zakeria and Affendi (2016) argue that culture is a valuable heritage that must be preserved, as it is not inherited biologically but must be learned and passed down from one generation to the next. Culture is closely linked to the civilization of a nation in achieving progress. This contradiction in viewpoints may confuse society about the benefits of cultural elements in educating the younger generation on the importance of maintaining these practices as part of Malay civilization.

In this regard, Malay cultural elements are also present in literary works. Literature serves as a medium to help readers learn about and understand Malay culture, which is deeply rooted in society. However, the integration of Malay cultural elements in children's literature requires special attention to ensure that younger generations fully comprehend the cultural heritage passed down to them. According to Arumugan (2024), there has been

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limited research on the development of children's literature in Malaysia and the representation of Malay culture in children's picture books, which should be given priority. This perspective clearly indicates the need for a dedicated study on local children's literature concerning cultural elements.

1.2. Research Objectives

This study is guided by the following research objectives:

i. To identify the elements of Malay culture embedded in the poetry book *Koleksi Cerita Siti* through illustrations.
ii. To analyze and summarize the elements of Malay culture in *Koleksi Cerita Siti* through illustrations based on the National Cultural Policy.

2. Methodology

This study employs a text analysis method by examining four children's poetry books written by Ismail (2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d) and gathering data from written sources such as theses, journals, books, and articles. Furthermore, the scope of this study is limited to the children's poetry books authored by Ismail (2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d), published in 2021 by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka. *Koleksi Cerita Siti*, which consists of four books—*Rumah Semut Kuala Abai*, *Kampung Pulau Kelapa*, *Kebun Rama-rama*, and *Mimpi Si Ikan Kaloi*—features unique illustrations that depict various aspects of Malay cultural heritage. Additionally, this study adopts the National Cultural Policy as a framework, which is based on three main principles: first, national culture must be rooted in the culture of the indigenous people of this region; second, appropriate and relevant elements from other cultures can be integrated into its formation; and third, Islam serves as an essential component in the development of the culture. These three principles have significant implications in establishing the historical foundation and socio-cultural evolution of Malaysia, which has undergone transformations from the prehistoric era to the Hindu-Buddhist, Islamic, and Western influences. The communities in this region have played a prominent role in world cultural history, particularly within the Malay civilization. The Malay cultural sphere extends across Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, the Pacific islands, and as far as Madagascar in East Africa.

3. Research Analysis

Therefore, a focused study on the illustrations in the children's poetry book *Koleksi Cerita Siti* is necessary to help readers clearly understand both the explicit and implicit meanings conveyed. This analysis identifies four key aspects of Malay cultural heritage depicted in the illustrations of *Koleksi Cerita Siti*: (1) the Culture of Welcoming Guests, (2) the Culture of Seeking Knowledge, (3) the Culture of Traditional Attire, and (4) the Culture of Sitting Cross-legged While Eating. To enhance understanding, this study will also include examples of illustrations that represent cultural heritage imagery, providing readers with a clearer perspective.

3.1. The Culture of Welcoming Guests

One of the cultural practices identified in *Koleksi Cerita Siti* is the tradition of welcoming guests. In the past, Malay society placed great emphasis on hospitality and etiquette when receiving visitors. They would serve drinks and food as a gesture of appreciation and to warmly welcome their guests. This practice has been passed down from generation to

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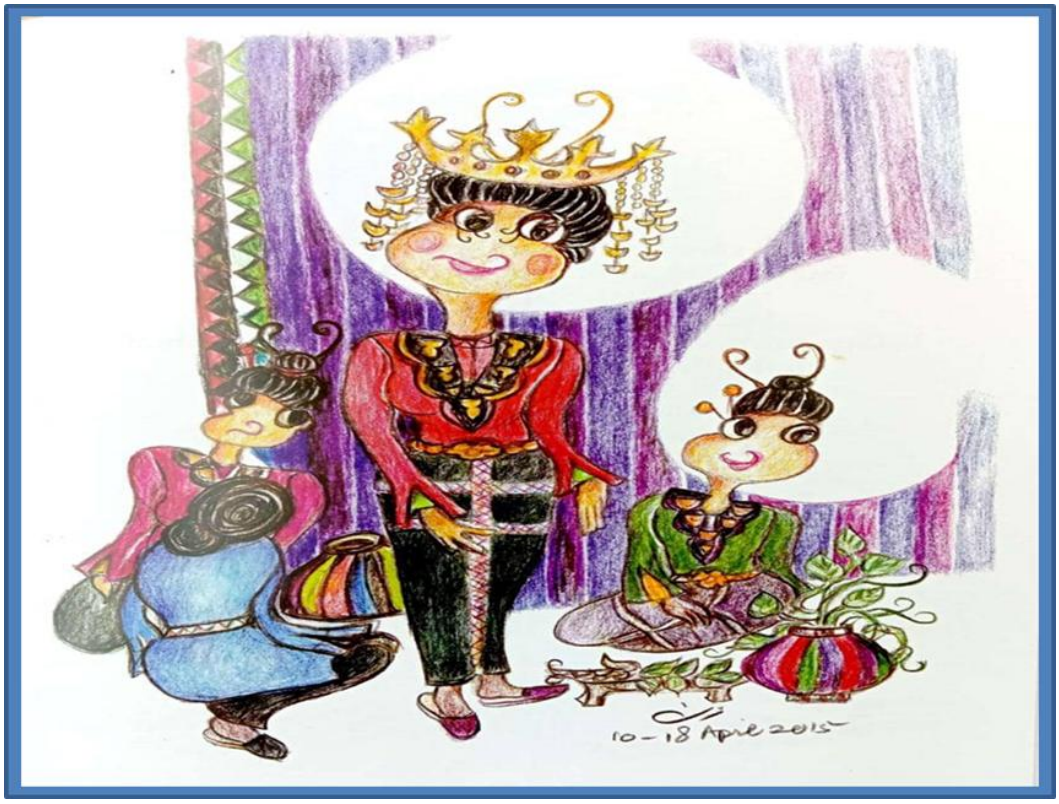
generation, as seen in the tradition of offering *sirih* (betel leaves) and *pinang* (areca nuts) to guests. These offerings were commonly prepared during gatherings or special ceremonies such as engagements and weddings. This tradition aligns with the first principle of the National Cultural Policy, which states that national culture must be rooted in the culture of the indigenous people of this region. It clearly illustrates that the Malay community places great importance on welcoming guests. Visitors are treated with the utmost respect and are offered refreshments as a sign of hospitality.

According to Mohamed and Radzi (2015), the consumption of *sirih* and *pinang* was a customary practice among the Malay community in the past. It was often consumed after meals, much like a dessert. Additionally, *sirih* and *pinang* served as a symbol of social status and were also used as a token of appreciation. This suggests that offering *sirih* and *pinang* to guests was a way of expressing gratitude and respect. Based on the illustration in Figure 1, *Rumah Semut Kuala Abai* by Ismail (2021d: 11), it is evident that the culture of welcoming guests is represented through the use of traditional ceremonial items, namely the *tepak sirih pinang* and *sirih junjung*, which serve as symbols in wedding ceremonies. *Sirih* (betel leaves) and *pinang* (areca nuts) are traditionally shared between the host and guests during discussions related to wedding arrangements.

Figure 1: *Rumah Semut Kuala Abai*



Source: Ismail (2021d: 11)

This tradition is further illustrated in a poem excerpt by Ismail (2021d):

> *"Sirih pinang menyambut tamu,*
> *Ibu mengunyah sambil bercerita.*
> *Asal usul orang Kuala Abai,*
> *Bajau Samah mesra bersaudara."* (Ismail. 2021d: 10)

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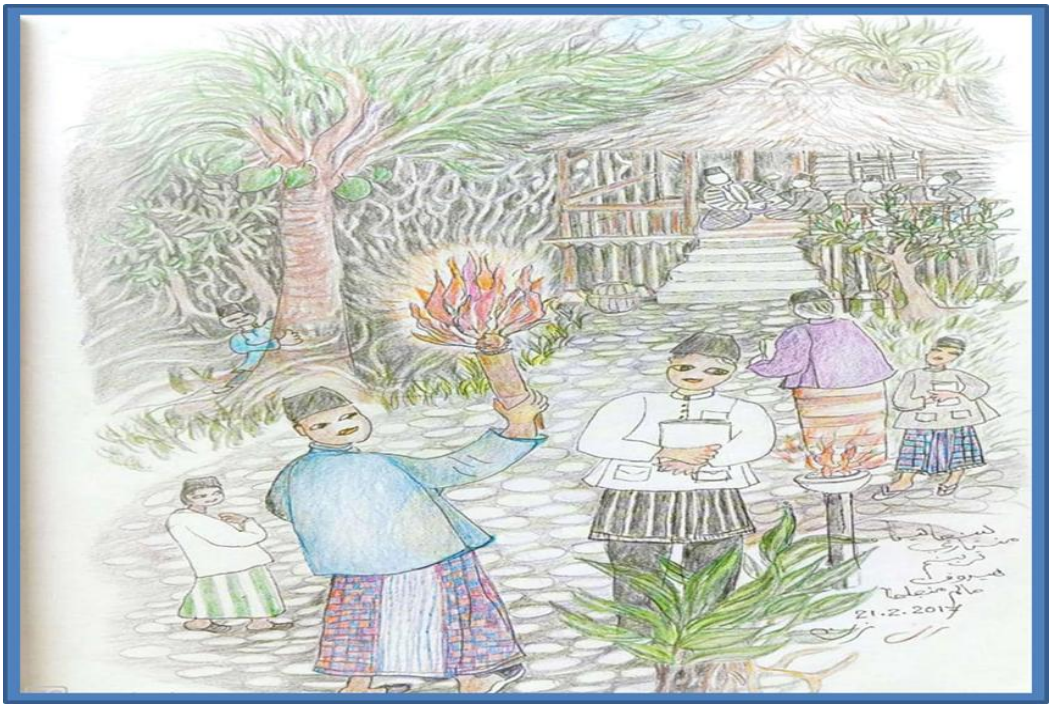
This excerpt clearly demonstrates that the practice of welcoming guests by offering *sirih pinang* is a customary way of honoring the visiting family of the bride or groom, symbolizing the union of two families through marriage. This cultural tradition, which has been practiced by the Malay community for generations, provides valuable knowledge to readers, particularly children, about traditional Malay wedding customs. It is essential to educate young readers about this heritage to ensure that the etiquette and traditions associated with Malay weddings are preserved and not lost over time.

3.2. The Culture of Seeking Knowledge

Another cultural practice identified in *Koleksi Cerita Siti* is the tradition of seeking knowledge. The pursuit of knowledge is fundamental in human life, ensuring that society remains educated with positive values, particularly in religious education, which brings benefits both in this world and the hereafter. Seeking knowledge is a lifelong process, beginning from birth and continuing until the end of one's life. This practice aligns with the third principle of the National Cultural Policy, which emphasizes Islam as a vital element in cultural formation. The Malay community has embraced Islam for centuries, and the pursuit of knowledge has become deeply ingrained in their way of life. According to the Jabatan Agama Islam Perak (2022) the culture of knowledge refers to a society's commitment to continuous learning. A knowledgeable society is capable of planning, implementing, and acting based on wisdom. The more one learns, the closer one becomes to Allah SWT. This learning process follows specific traditions and customs, as seen in past generations who would attend *surau* (small mosques) to study the Quran. This tradition of seeking knowledge has been passed down through generations as a means of sustaining the intellectual heritage that shapes and educates the community. Based on the illustration in Figure 2, *Kampung Pulau Kelapa* by Ismail (2021a) it is depicts the practice of seeking knowledge being carried out by a group of village children, who are shown walking towards a surau to learn to recite the Quran. They are seen holding copies of the Quran and carrying torches or oil lamps to illuminate their path.

Figure 2: *Kampung Pulau Kelapa*



Source: Ismail (2021a)

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Additionally, a Quran teacher is depicted waiting for their arrival at the surau. This practice is also described in a poem excerpt by Ismail (2021a):

> *"Jamung dibakar dan bernyala,*
> *Memberi cahaya di malam hari,*
> *Untuk kami pergi ke surau,*
> *Belajar dan mengaji,*
> *Di tangan ustaz rotan menanti".* (Ismail. 2021a: 20)

This action was a common practice among villagers in the past, where they would go to the surau in groups, using torches or oil lamps to light their way. Moreover, the image of the teacher holding a cane represents the traditional method used by educators to instill discipline and dedication in their students while seeking knowledge.

This is a valuable lesson for today's society, emphasizing the importance of perseverance and determination in the pursuit of education. It serves as a reminder that students must be willing to work hard and overcome challenges to gain knowledge that will benefit both themselves and their families. Furthermore, a firm and disciplined approach by teachers is essential in guiding children so that they remain focused and are not easily distracted by worldly pleasures.

3.3. The Culture of Tradisional Attire

Next, the culture of traditional clothing has also been identified in the poetry book *Koleksi Cerita Siti*. Clothing serves as a symbol of national identity and represents a particular ethnic group in a specific community. According to Elaveenthan (2020), traditional attire in Malaysia includes the *baju Melayu* for men and the *baju kurung* for women. Meanwhile, Indian traditional clothing consists of two types: the *kurta* and *dhoti* for men, while women wear the *saree*. Additionally, various other traditional outfits represent different ethnic groups in Malaysia, such as the Chinese community and indigenous groups in Sabah and Sarawak.

This aligns with the second principle of the National Cultural Policy, which states that suitable and appropriate cultural elements from other traditions can be accepted as part of the nation's cultural formation. Malaysians have become familiar with and comfortable wearing traditional clothing from other ethnic groups, often donning them during special events or celebrations. According to Ismail (2006), traditional clothing, as part of cultural customs, carries symbolic significance, particularly in royal traditions, where it represents prestige. The term "clothing" is also associated with roles, usage, refinement, accessories, and materials that showcase fashion and style.

This implies that traditional clothing is worn based on its role and purpose. Based on the illustration in Figure 3, *Kebun Rama-rama* by Ismail (2021b), it is the practice of wearing traditional clothing, specifically the *baju kurung*, can be observed through the character named Leha. Leha is depicted as a young girl wearing a purple *baju kurung* while playing.

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Figure 3: *Kebun Rama-rama*

Source: Ismail (2021b)

This is also described in the poem excerpt by Ismail (2021b):

> *"Leha berbaju kurung ungu,*
> *Pita merah di kepala,*
> *Rama-rama cerdik dan cantik,*
> *Awan biru bergumpal lalu".* (Ismail. 2021b: 2)

This clearly illustrates a child dressed in a *baju kurung* while playing with a butterfly. Wearing traditional clothing in daily life is a commendable practice, as the *baju kurung* is a modest outfit that aligns with Islamic teachings and maintains a respectful appearance for the wearer.

This depiction indirectly educates readers, especially children, to adopt the practice of wearing traditional attire in their daily activities, encouraging them to uphold both religious and cultural values.

3.4. The Culture of Sitting Cross-Legged While Eating

Next, the practice of eating while sitting cross-legged (*makan bersila*) is also identified in the poetry book *Koleksi Cerita Siti*. This dining tradition has been practiced by the Malay community for generations, particularly when having meals at home. Family members would gather together during mealtime, with food served on a mat instead of a dining table, as is more common today. Sitting cross-legged on a woven *mengkuang* mat while food is placed on a large tray (*dulang*) has long been a tradition, especially in rural Malay communities. Family members would sit in a circle around the food before beginning their meal.

According to Pauzi (2019), the concept of communal dining (*makan bertalam*), sitting cross-legged, and wearing traditional Malay attire is a cultural practice that should be

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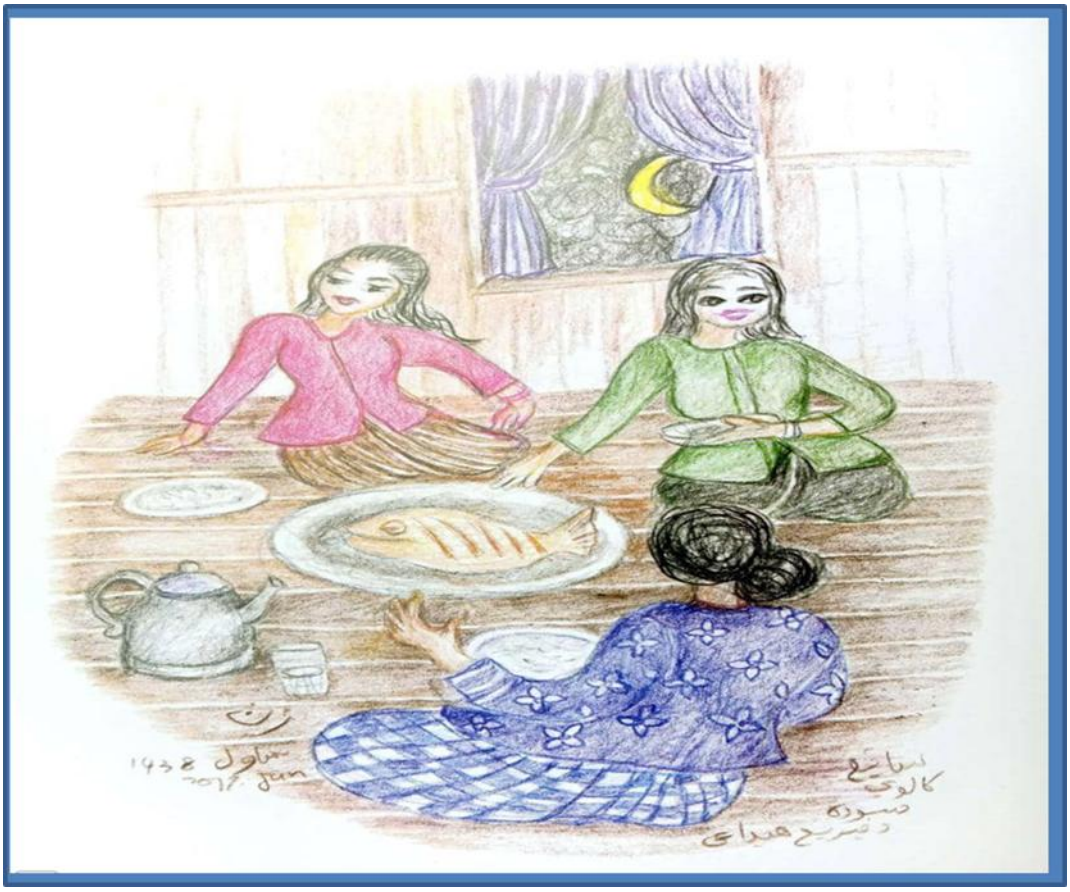
revived to prevent it from being lost over time. This practice serves to educate younger generations about traditions once upheld by the Malay community, especially during feasts and celebrations. Meanwhile, Zaini (2019) states that the practice of communal tray dining and sitting cross-legged at celebratory events is gradually disappearing as people now prefer buffet-style dining.

This highlights how the Malay community has traditionally practiced *makan bersila* during wedding feasts, although this cultural custom is now fading due to societal changes. This aligns with the first principle of the National Cultural Policy, which emphasizes that national culture should be based on the traditions of the indigenous people of the region. It is evident that *makan bersila* is deeply rooted in Malay culture, practiced not only during special occasions but also in daily household meals. Based on the illustration in Figure 4, *Mimpi Si Ikan Kaloi* by Ismail (2021c), it is evident that the act of *makan bersila* (sitting cross-legged while dining) is being performed by the characters Bawang Putih, Bawang Merah, and Mak Mandak.

Figure 4: *Mimpi Si Ikan Kaloi*



Source: Ismail (2021c)

They are depicted sitting cross-legged, facing a meal that consists of a fried fish. This scene is also captured in the poem excerpt by Ismail (2021c):

"Malam pun tiba,
Goreng ikan sudah terhidang,
Mak Mandak senyum riang,

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Pelawa Bawang Putih makan bersama,
Bawang Merah juga bermanis muka." (Ismail. 2021c: 17)

Clearly, the characters are sitting together to enjoy their dinner, which consists of a single fried fish. This illustrates the traditional Malay practice of dining together as a way of sharing sustenance and blessings. Indirectly, this depiction educates readers about the *makan bersila* tradition, which was once a common practice in Malay society when families gathered to share meals. This scene also conveys an important lesson to readers, encouraging them to embrace communal dining and appreciate the value of eating together, even if it means sharing a simple meal like a single fried fish.

5. Conclusion

Thus, based on the analysis, it is evident that *Koleksi Cerita Siti* by Ismail (2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d) genuinely embodies the heritage of Malay culture, which is translated through the medium of illustrations. The study reveals that the traditions of Welcoming Guests, Pursuing Knowledge, Traditional Attire, and Cross-Legged Dining featured in this work serve as an educational tool, particularly for children. Consequently, the illustrations in this literary piece not only provide modern-day children with newfound knowledge but also leave a profound positive impact, shaping their character and instilling a strong sense of identity as a civilized Malay community.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

All consents form the participants were obtained before the research was carried out. All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors reported no conflicts of interest for this work and declare that there is no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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