



Tides of Connection: Exploring Human-River/Sea Relationships in Children's Short Stories through An Ecocritical Lens

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Submitted: 24 Dec 2023

Revised: 19 April 2024

Accepted: 8 June 2024

Abstract. Through an ecocritical perspective, this paper investigates the issue of ecological consciousness in children's literature from Southeast Asia. With a focus on four tales from Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam, and Indonesia, the study explores the interaction between people and the environment—more specifically, rivers and oceans. The purpose of the study is to expose anthropocentrism and how it affects human existence in these stories. The study uses content analysis in conjunction with a descriptive qualitative method to look for recurring themes and patterns in the chosen stories. The portrayal of human-environment links in each narrative is examined in depth in the first section of the examination. The role of rivers and oceans as allies and adversaries is examined in the second section. By analyzing various Southeast Asian viewpoints, this study adds to our understanding of ecological consciousness in children's literature and illuminates the complex interactions that exist in the area between the environment and humankind.

Keywords: *Ecocriticism; ecological consciousness; Southeast Asian children's stories*

Abstrak

Artikel ini mengeksplorasi tema kesadaran ekologis dalam sastra anak-anak Asia Tenggara melalui lensa ekokritis. Dengan fokus pada empat cerita dari Indonesia, Vietnam, Singapura, dan Malaysia, penelitian ini menyelidiki hubungan antara manusia dan lingkungan, khususnya sungai dan laut. Penelitian bertujuan untuk mengungkap antroposentrisme dan dampaknya terhadap kehidupan manusia dalam narasi-narasi yang telah dipilih. Dengan menggunakan metode kualitatif deskriptif, penelitian ini menggunakan analisis konten untuk mengidentifikasi tema dan pola dalam cerita. Bagian pertama analisis berisi tentang gambaran hubungan manusia-lingkungan dalam setiap narasi. Bagian kedua menganalisis berfokus pada bagaimana sungai dan laut berfungsi sebagai teman dan musuh. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi pada pemahaman kesadaran ekologis dalam sastra anak-anak dengan memeriksa beragam perspektif Asia Tenggara, membuka cahaya terhadap hubungan yang rumit antara manusia dan lingkungan di kawasan ini.

Kata Kunci: *Kajian ekokritik; kesadaran ekologis; cerita anak-anak Asia Tenggara*

Introduction

The theme of advancement in human history is frequently paired with a more somber one about environmental devastation. The fragile balance of the natural world suffers more and more damage as human societies grow. Climate change and deforestation for industrial purposes are just two examples of how human activity is collectively changing the globe at a rate never seen before. Consider the mining of coal, which is known to pollute the ecosystem and destroy landscapes (Feng, Wang, Bai, & Reading, 2019). Additionally, the development of oil palm farms and the consumption of palm oil may lead to alterations in habitat, changes in the environment, and a decline in biodiversity (Danielsen et al., 2009). For instance, the flood that appears to be a natural disaster and does harm to the public and environment is primarily the result of human activity that is rich in ignorance. We need to pay attention to this era of environmental destruction as we struggle with the fallout from our own technological breakthroughs. Numerous academics have maintained that humanity's awareness must change from a resistance to admitting our reliance on the environment to a more peaceful coexistence with the non-human world. Ecological consciousness is the name given to this type of consciousness (White, 2011).

One of the most important components of environmental education is teaching kids about ecological consciousness, which aims to give them a profound appreciation and respect for the natural world. According to research, children's environmental moral reasoning frequently emphasizes homocentric reasons, such as the need to preserve nature for the sake of humans (Kahn & Friedman, 1995). But worries concerning today's kids' commitment to preserve and take care of the environment have been raised due to their seeming lack of connection to nature (Strife & Downey, 2009). As a result, creating educational strategies that promote ecological consciousness at a young age is crucial. Using literature to explain complex ideas to kids is one of the most effective yet straightforward methods. Young readers can be introduced to ecological themes and encouraged to be environmentally concerned through children's literature. Children's literature may foster an awareness of ecological systems and the value of environmental stewardship by adding stories that emphasize the interdependence of humans and nature (Santoso, 2022). Furthermore, Livo also suggests that "exposure to literature should provide enjoyment and help youngsters realize its importance as a mirror of human experiences, reflecting human motives, conflicts, and values. Young story listeners should be able to identify with characters in human situations as a means of relating to others." (2003, p.4).

This research will dive deeper on four children's literatures from four different countries in Southeast Asia. The stories observed are *Luh Ayu Manik Mas: Pahlawan Lingkungan* (Supartika, n.d.) from Indonesia, *Son Tinh and Thuy Tinh—the Mountain Lord and the Sea Lord* (Phuoc, 2015) from Vietnam, *The Raja's Mistake* (Taylor, 2003) from Singapore, and *Badang, the Strongest Man below the Wind* (Lyons, 2016) from Malaysia. Despite coming from four diverse locations, the four stories share a common theme in which the natural world—particularly the sea and rivers—plays a significant role. As a result, the specific theme is appropriately seen within the ecocriticism lens. According to the most widely used definition, ecocriticism is the "study of the relationship between physical environment and literature" (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996).

Furthermore, Garrard defines this method as "the study of the relationship between the human and the non-human" (2010, p.5), which further clarifies the meaning.

Research into ecocriticism in children's literature has been carried out by a few researchers, who have also conducted study on topics and/or issues of interest or concern that are related. *Lifetimes* by Bryan Mellonie and Roberst Ingpen, *The Red Tree* by Shaun Tan, and *In the Piney Woods* by Bulcken Root were the three works of children's literature that each are analysed by Lankford (2010). Lankford is especially interested in the building of nature as either a place for the child character to retreat, grow, and heal, or as a source of knowledge about the notions of death and life cycles. Lankford is focusing on the function that nature plays in the three picture books that deal with themes related to death. When it comes to literature for young children, Lankford discovers that authors and illustrators of picture books continue to use nature elements throughout the work.

Still within the realm of environmental children's literature, Batty (2016) investigates the utilization of fantasy as a means of fostering ecological knowledge. The books *Watership Down* by Richard Adams, *FernGully* by Diana Young, and *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* by Salman Rushdie are analyzed by Batty via the lens of ecocriticism, which is composed of literary depictions of the interaction between humans and nonhumans. In addition to addressing a variety of distinct environmental concerns, each of these three novels features a unique combination of fantasy elements. The normal human-centered paradigm that typically permeates Western thought is challenged by all three books, which, despite their variances, advocate for a perspective of the world that is centred on the Earth. There is a vast variety of conceivable settings and characters in fantasy, which offers a flexibility that enables authors to handle environmental concerns in unique ways that engage readers' intellects and imaginations. This is one of the reasons why fantasy is a valuable genre for authors of environmental children's fiction, as the analysis indicates.

In the last study, Emine & Bayram (2020) looked at Hasan Ali Toptaş's children's novel, *I Am a Hornbeam Branch*. The study focuses on how Hasan Ali Toptaş's book's vivid portrayal of nature helps to frame environmental degradation as a social issue and creates images of "protection" that are grounded in ecological consciousness. The relationship between humans and the environment is portrayed as a problem for both nature and mankind from the outset of the novel until its conclusion. These issues are referred regarded as social, psychological, and cultural issues as well as natural concerns because they have a detrimental impact on every element of the planet. Using ecological language, environmental challenges are addressed both textually and visually. Additionally, this study covered several methods to think about non-monologue depictions of the natural world. Aslan and Bas further claim that children's views, attitudes, and actions toward the outside world are shaped by cultural beliefs that are taught to them regarding the environment. Children's literature must so develop texts, images, and ideas in a non-anthropocentric manner and in relation to nature.

This paper will refer to the previous works done and propose a new perspective about ecocriticism on children's literature by carrying two objectives, 1) to observe the relationship between the human and the nonhuman, specifically the river and the sea, and 2) to explain the impact of that relationship for the human's life.

Methods

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach using content analysis to explore environmental themes in contemporary South East Asia's short stories. Content analysis is a systematic method for examining textual data to identify recurring themes, patterns, and meanings (Colorafi & Evans, 2016). A purposive sampling approach was used to select targeted short stories that explicitly mentioned environmental issues or settings. These stories were written by children and originate from Indonesia, Vietnam, Singapore, and Malaysia.

The analysis involved a three-step process. First, all four short stories were read multiple times to gain familiarity with the content and identify potential themes. Second, a coding scheme was developed based on core concepts from ecocriticism, such as human-environment relationships, representations of nature, and environmental justice. The coding scheme was then applied to the stories, systematically coding segments of text relevant to these concepts. Finally, the coded data was analyzed to identify recurring themes and patterns related to the environment.

Finding and Discussion

In line with the research questions that have been formulated, the discussion is divided into two main sections. The first part of the analysis focuses on exploring and developing the potential anthropocentrism evident in the four selected pieces of children's literature. The aim is to reveal the connection portrayed between humans and the environment in these stories. This section of the discussion demonstrates that despite the stories originating from different countries, they share a common approach in depicting the relationship between humans and the non-human elements. Specifically, the stories heavily emphasize the dependency of humans on the non-human and the control humans tend to exert over them. Moving beyond the realm of these stories, the second part of the discussion provides a real-life analysis of the impact this relationship has on human life, irrespective of whether it is positive or negative.

The Relationship between the Human and the Sea/River

The discipline of ecocriticism investigates the relationships and interdependencies that exist between humans and what we once referred to as "non-human" entities within the context of literary and cultural works, especially those that appear to be oblivious to the world that is not inhabited by humans (Rahman, Haque, Arafat, Bhattacharya, & Akter, 2022). In addition to the fact that it investigates the relationship between nature, animals, and ecosystems, this study also poses a challenge to the concept of anthropocentrism. According to Lamichhane, (2019), anthropocentrism is one of the philosophical approaches to ecocriticism that focuses primarily on human and non-human relationships, with a particular emphasis on human relationships. This word sheds light on the ways in which humans have failed to recognize the inherent worth of non-humans and the ways in which people appear to act as the only proprietors of the entire natural world by using non-humans as resources. Within the realm of literature, Volkman & Fraunhofer (2022) asserts that "...ecocriticism is primarily interested in literary and cultural representations and concepts of the more-than-human (what we

used to call the "nonhuman" in a more problematic, binary terminology), and in the way in which such representations contribute to conceptualizations of nature". This statement highlights the primary focus of this approach, which is to reveal the control that humans have over the nonhuman. Additionally, the topic is split into two categories based on how the narrative presents the interaction between humans and non-human entities.

1. *Sea/River as a Resource or Livelihood*

The first part of this section will dive deeper into the three short stories that depict the sea/river as the main resource or livelihood. Set in a small village in Bali that still has strong cultural values, the Indonesian children's short story titled *Luh Ayu Manik Mas: Pahlawan Lingkungan* perfectly shows how the stream of water is something that is closely related to the daily activities of the people, especially for their cultural practices. Nevertheless, the domination over the river is made abundantly obvious via the actions of the characters of the story. This short story describes the story of Luh Ayu Manik, beginning with Luh Ayu frantically searching for a plastic bag to take offerings to the school. Her mother had suggested that she use a little woven basket, but she declined the suggestion and instead chose to use the plastic bag because it was handier. On the following day, she sat down in front of the television and, after watching the commercial that was produced by the government of Bali, she finally became aware of the significance of limiting the use of plastic bags. Luh Ayu, as if she had been reborn into a new person, became more environmentally conscious and even encouraged her friends to adopt a similar lifestyle. The moment that Luh Ayu and her companion discovered that her other pals were throwing rubbish into the river was the moment that nature was dominated by humans.

On their way home from the market, Luh Ayu Manik and Putu Nita saw Wayan and Made dumping plastic and foam in the river. It was such a large amount that they had to use a trailer. And it was not only leftovers from the *ogoh-ogoh* that were being thrown away, but all sorts of rubbish like plastic bottles, cans, and food wrappers made of plastic. There was so much garbage that the river became blocked! It began overflowing onto the road (p. 18).

As shown by the snippet that was just presented, the society in the narrative takes the natural world for granted. Even though the river is depicted as something useful for humans, humans were still damaging and considering it to be a garbage can and an alternative method of getting rid of stuff in a short amount of time. Not only Wayan and Made, but Luh Ayu was also labeled in the past as someone who was ignorant about the environment, and her ignorance was demonstrated by the monologue that is presented below:

While she was eating, she wondered why she should use less plastic. Plastic had many uses, such as a bag for carrying shopping, and as a container for taking offerings to school when there was a full moon. Plus, using plastic made things easier. After you have used something, you just throw it in the

trash, no fuss. She thought about these things all the way through her meal (p. 5).

Next, the short narrative and *folktale Son Tinh and Thủy Tinh: The Mountain Lord and the Sea Lord*, which originate from Vietnam, present a unique point of view regarding the relationship between humans and nonhumans. The plot centers on the efforts of the 18th Hung King to bring his daughter into a relationship with a suitable suitor. Sơn Tinh, a mountain God, and Thủy Tinh, a river God, were the two contenders that the King judged to be an equal match from the results of the contest that he organized. Having complete authority over the mountains, the sea, and the storms, Sơn Tinh and Thủy Tinh engaged in a dangerous conflict, causing widespread destruction across the lands with their destructive abilities. Eventually, Sơn Tinh emerged victorious, but Thủy Tinh's unwillingness to yield caused him to unleash ferocious storms and floods upon the regions, leaving a trail of destruction in his wake. Sơn Tinh ultimately emerged victorious. In order to safeguard the farms, residences, and crops of the people, Sơn Tinh elevated the mountains until Thủy Tinh, who was tired, was compelled to retreat. In each successive year, he endeavored to exact revenge, but Sơn Tinh consistently resisted him. In the context of this tale, Thủy Tinh symbolizes the yearly floods and storms that cause immense destruction in Vietnam, whereas Sơn Tinh exemplifies the perseverance and bravery of the Vietnamese people when confronted with instances of natural catastrophes. The two main characters are depicted as two significant aspects of human life, things that humans cannot live without: the mountain and the sea. Although the story does not directly discuss the link between humans and the environment or how the former takes control over the latter, the two main characters are considered to be significant aspects of human life.

“If you choose me, your daughter will help me rule the vast mountains!” exclaimed Sơn Tinh. “I control all of the forest animals, majestic trees, and prized jewels. With me, she would be guaranteed a peaceful and prosperous life!” (p. 41)

According to the description, the mountain is the area where people can discover a life that is abundant in serenity and prosperity. In Vietnam, the cultural and spiritual practices that are strongly rooted in the country's history have a strong connection to the metaphorical image of mountains as a source of calm and prosperous living. To highlight religious peace and cultural life, the construction of sand mountains during traditional holidays, such as the Khmer New Year in Southern Vietnam, acts as a significant cultural and spiritual activity (Son, 2022). These mountains also serve as a symbol of prosperity and unity within the community. In addition, the worship of the Hung Kings in Vietnam involves the reclamation of land that has been abandoned, the cultivation of rice, and the performance of rituals on the highest mountain in order to pray for favorable weather conditions, abundant crops, and prosperity (Loi, 2021). This further emphasizes the symbolic significance of mountains in Vietnamese culture.

“I rule the vast oceans and the creatures within it! I have beautiful gems, coral, and pearls. I can command the rains, the thunder, the storms, and

strong winds to nourish and protect your kingdom. A life with me would be a life of happiness and comfort.” (p. 41)

It is also said that the seas, in addition to mountains, are a source of comfort and enjoyment with their presence. According to Duong & Dong (2019), the sea has historically been an important source of livelihood in Vietnam, particularly through fishing and marine trade. As a result, the sea has had a significant impact on the cultural and economic activities of coastal communities. If you are able to "rule" the waters, you will also be able to discover an infinite number of life sources, which will provide you comfort and enjoyment.

After discussing the role of Sơn Tinh and Thủy Tinh as the symbolization of natural and natural disasters, we cannot forget to discuss Hung King as the ancient Vietnam ruler. As explained above, the link between humans and the environment or how the former takes control over the latter is not explicitly described in the folktale, but as some researchers (Ingwersen, 1993; Johnson, 1998; Uche, 2018) have mentioned, Folktales have implicit meaning because they mirror unconscious views put onto characters. Folktales, as a response to history, allow readers to study anxiety-provoking issues from a safe distance while also allowing for interpretation without being unduly didactic. With this perspective, we can use not just Sơn Tinh and Thủy Tinh, but also the character of Hung King as a symbol.

Hung King is the title given to ancient Vietnamese rulers during the Hồng Bàng period (2879–258 BC). The worship of Hung Kings in Vietnam is a common practice rooted in ancestor worship, representing filial piety and togetherness among the Vietnamese people throughout history (Duc, 2022). Not only that, but Hung King is regarded as Vietnam's national symbol, used to empower the community in the face of the need for national survival and growth. Given the historical relevance of Hung King, it is appropriate to analyze its representation in folktales. In the legend of Sơn Tinh and Thủy Tinh, Hung King and his daughter can be interpreted as humans. The way Sơn Tinh and Thủy Tinh are offering their natural assets to the king and his daughter can be seen as how nature is expected to be dominated by humans. Livelihood in Vietnam, especially in the coastal region, heavily relies on the river systems and Canals (Tran et al., 2023). Mangrove habitats in locations like Nghệ An Province, for example, contribute significantly to local livelihoods through activities like marine fishing and agriculture, with income structures influenced by landscape patterns (Tho, 2020). This shows how humans very much depend on the river and how they naturally takes control of the river for their survival.

Lastly, *Badang, the Strongest Man below the Wind* is the title of the child's short story that comes from Malaysia. An impoverished young guy by the name of Badang lived in a place that was below the wind. He had the dream of becoming a fisherman or a sailor, but he was turned down because he was considered to be too frail and feeble. After the passing of his parents, Badang found himself in a state of isolation until he discovered a Water Spirit taking fish from his trap. After confronting the spirit and wins over it, he desired to become the most powerful man below the wind. His demand was fulfilled by the Water Spirit, who made him the chief wrestler for the King, but with the stipulation that he was not allowed to compete against men from places above the wind. When Badang rescued sailors and fishermen from an accident at sea, he earned the

admiration of the people. His newly discovered strength proved to be beneficial in this situation. He was given the position of head wrestler by the King, and Badang became well-known for his ability to triumph over opponents from countries below the wind. A letter from a monarch above the wind, on the other hand, issued a challenge to Badang to compete against Aftabus, their most skilled wrestler. In the face of Aftabus, Badang, who was unaware of the secret, came to the realization that he had lost his strength, just as the Water Spirit had warned him. It was through Badang's bravery that he was able to triumph against Aftabus in a hard battle, demonstrating that true strength is not derived from physical power but rather from an individual's will and bravery. Badang emerged triumphant and maintained the respect and adoration of his friends, despite the fact that he had significantly diminished his extraordinary strength.

The ocean is portrayed as a representation of masculinity in the narrative of Badang. Those individuals who were able to achieve the status of sailor and embark on a voyage at sea are considered to be courageous:

Badang wanted to become a sailor and go to sea. But the sailors just laughed at him. "You can 't be a sailor," they said. "You are too thin and weak. Sailors must be strong!" So Badang tried to become a fisherman. But the fishermen just laughed at him. "You can 't be a fisherman," they said. "You are too thin and weak. Fisherman must be strong!" (p. 15)

The remark that "a sailor should be strong" is a reflection of the physical demands and difficulties that are involved with the nautical vocation. Due to the fact that sailing involves a variety of duties, including hoisting sails, navigating through tough weather conditions, and operating equipment on the ship, sailing has always required a sufficient amount of physical strength. At sea, where the conditions can be unpredictable and demanding, a sailor's strength is frequently put to the test in potentially dangerous situations rather frequently. Not only does the short story discuss the sea, but it also discusses the river as an additional source of life, providing Badang with an alternative when he is unable to be a sailor. In the narrative, Badang was an orphan who, with the knowledge that his frail body would never let him become a sailor, made the decision to capture fish in the river by employing the trap that his late father had set up as a means of surviving.

Additionally, the depiction of how humans control the nonhumans can be seen in the relationship between Badang and the Water Spirit. Badang is a human and the Water Spirit is the representation of the water itself. Badang successfully defeats the Water Spirit after it steals Badang's fish, and then Badang asks for a wish which the Water Spirit inevitably grants. This story illustrates how humans successfully take control of nature (in this case, the river) and use it for whatever we need. Which in the end, shows the essence of human anthropocentrism. In Malaysia, rivers are essential to populations' means of subsistence. They are an essential source of transportation, food, and water. For instance, the Engkari River in Sarawak, Malaysia, is essential to the Iban community's way of life since it supplies them with food, water, transportation, and the means to continue their customary farming methods (Sanggin, Mersat, Kiong, Salleh, & B, 2016).

2. *Sea/River as Interference*

The last story comes from Singapore with the title *The Raja's Mistake*, and different from the three short stories above, this short piece put its focus on how the sea is an interference or enemy for humans. *The Raja's Mistake* recounts the history of the tropical island nation of Singapore. In the midst of a storm, a shoal of furious swordfish stormed the coast, generating chaos and danger. Raja Iskander, the monarch of the island, was confronted with a predicament. Despite the fact that the Raja dispatched soldiers to battle the swordfish out of fear of foes or curses, the soldiers were ultimately defeated. A young boy with quick thinking proposed the idea of constructing a barrier out of banana stems in order to capture the swordfish. This approach was straightforward and efficient. Because the strategy was successful, the locals expressed their gratitude to the young man. As a result of the Raja's perception that the boy's popularity and intelligence were a threat to him, he made the decision to have him executed. In the course of their search for him, the soldiers came across a mysterious elderly woman who divulged the Raja's nefarious plans. The woman used a mystical force to punish the soldiers, which resulted in the hill turning red and leaving a message for the people about the Raja's brutal treatment of them. After everything was said and done, the swordfish never came back, and both the elderly woman and the young child vanished. crimson Hill, also known as Bukit Merah, is the location where this story took place. The soil there is still crimson, serving as a constant reminder of the Raja's error and the consequences that resulted from his harsh behavior. In spite of the fact that the sea was not the primary focus of the short story, it is nonetheless an essential component of the narrative since it serves as the catalyst that causes the entire event to manifest.

According to one description, Singapore is a tropical island that is encircled by sea. Because of this, the majority of Singaporeans are self-sufficient and work as sailors to support themselves. In the first paragraph of the story, the water that surrounds Singapore was described as being the most brilliant blue sapphire. However, when it was stormy, the sea "turns grey with angry white caps on the tips of the waves" (p. 24).

"Aeeiyah!" one cried. "It's a curse!"

"The Gods of the Sea are angry with us," cried another.

"It's the Raja's enemies," said yet another (p. 25).

In addition, as was demonstrated in the preceding passage, the people believed that the ocean and all of its inhabitants, particularly the hazardous sword fish, were the adversaries of the head of state. This provides an explanation for the relationship that exists between humans and the water, in which, despite the fact that the sea was one of the most significant sources of their life, they continued to view it as an adversary that needed to be subdued and administered.

Reading this story through an ecocritical lens entails attention on how the people perceive the body of water and its inhabitants as Raja's enemy, which they later attempt to conquer. This is also in accordance with the perspective of anthropocentrism, which places humans at the center of the universe, prioritizing human well-being as the ultimate goal, and can be studied through attitudes about man's role in nature (Kopnina, 2019). The idea of ecocriticism, which opposes the anthropocentric perspective that regards humans as the lords of nature and promotes a more interdependent relationship,

can then be viewed as a crucial pillar. Furthermore, the folklore depicts the opposite ways of how humans treat nature. Raja is the depiction of anthropocentrism, where he sees the swordfish as a pest and brutally exterminates them without thinking about the consequences, and the young boy, on the contrary, serves as a representation of how humans can still control nature (the sea) without extremely dominating it. It depicts the “interconnected” relationship that ecocriticism tried to pursue.

The River and the Sea as a Friend and a Foe

Throughout the course of *Luh Ayu Manik Mas: Pahlawan Lingkungan*, the river is shown both as a friend and as an enemy. Following the conclusion of the celebration, Luh Ayu overheard people screaming in terror as a monster appeared from a river that had been contaminated. The body of the monster was covered with garbage, notably materials that had been discarded into the river by Wayan and Made, who were friends of Luh Ayu Manik. It is possible to consider the giant in this instance to be the personification of the river, and it does so by spitting fire as it vents its anger at the human for irresponsibly destroying the river. In spite of its look, the monster was intended to serve as a warning to humans to refrain from engaging in damaging activity toward the environment, particularly the river. According to Rosilawati et al. (2020), Balinese culture is profoundly connected with the Ayung River, both historically and culturally. This is due to the fact that the river plays a significant role in the maintenance of local customs and the development of communities that are committed to sustainability. In order to demonstrate the river's ongoing impact on the formation of the Balinese people's cultural identity, the Balinese people have incorporated the river into their religious activities. These practices include the management of irrigation systems and the performance of domestic rituals (Maulana, Untung, & Rosyidah, 2022). According to Astawa & Jayantini (2023), the Balinese Hindu society makes use of the river as a medium for character education. This is done with the intention of highlighting the spiritual and moral value of the river in their belief system.

In *Son Tinh and Thuy Tinh*, this short story, which also included as a folklore, is believed to be the myth of how the monsoon season in Vietnam happened. In an effort to never accept his defeat, Thuy Tinh makes a yearly return to Son Tinh at the same time in order to engage in a fight with him. Heavy rains, strong gusts, and crashing waves are all characteristics of the resumption of the conflict, which causes the people to once again flee in search of safety. And each year, as he continues to be unsuccessful in his attempts to win the princess, he returns to the ocean. Since then, it had turned into a loop that never came to an end. Today, when the monsoon rains arrive every June of the year, signifying the Lord of the Sea's wrath, negligence, and contempt, the Vietnamese people are aware that Thuy Tinh is once again attempting to achieve the victory that he was never able to achieve. Despite the fact that the monsoon season in Vietnam can bring about significant rainfall and flooding in the central region of the country, as well as having a negative impact on people and infrastructure, this season also has the potential to bring about a number of good consequences for the country. It is significant for agriculture that the monsoon season begins because it signifies the change from the dry season to the rainy season. This transition is necessary for the cultivation of crops and other agricultural operations because it provides the necessary amount of rainfall. According to Acharya & Bennett's research from 2020, rain-fed

agricultural systems are especially dependent on the capacity to accurately forecast the beginning of the rainy season. This provides farmers with the opportunity to plan and be ready for the production of crops. Ngo-Thi-Thanh and Vu-Thanh (2017) also state that the monsoon season is also responsible for a substantial portion of the replenishment of water resources. These water resources are necessary for the irrigation of agricultural land and continue to maintain ecosystems.

Badang and *The Raja's Mistake* are treated in the same manner. Both of these children's short stories focused on the sea as the source of life for the community, highlighting the relevance of the sea in human life and the ways in which people attempted to become sailors and traveled into the ocean. The story does not hide the fact that it also emphasized how dependent Singaporeans were on the ocean, making it clear about the sea's role as both an enemy that humans want to defeat and also as a friend, who provides humans with a source of life in the form of fish and all the contents of the ocean. Although at first, the ocean appears to be their adversary, for example, in *The Raja's Mistake*, the dangerous swordfish were the primary threat because they attacked the people living in the coastal area and caused a great number of casualties. In *Badang*, the significance of the nonhuman not only comes from the ocean but also comes from the river. The river serves not just as an enemy but also as a friend. As a result of the fact that Badang is unable to be a sailor, the river becomes his source of life. Friends in the sense that Badang searches for supplies of food from the river. It is possible to observe the river as an adversary when the water spirit comes and takes Badang's fish; yet, the adversary transforms into a friend when the water spirit loses and grants Badang's request.

Based on the discussion above, we can see that the relationship between human and non-human, especially river and sea, can be seen as a relationship that is mutually beneficial and detrimental at the same time. Beneficial in the sense that rivers and seas are important aspects of human life since the bodies of water provide livelihoods for the people. Even in the short story *Badang*, the sea is depicted to be the symbol of masculinity in the community since being a sailor is the main source of livelihood for the local people. Furthermore, even when Badang "defeated" the river spirit (which we can consider as the personification of the river), the spirit is still the one who gives and the human is the one who receives from it. Nevertheless, bodies of water can also be the enemy of human beings, but if we analyze more carefully, the sea or river in the stories is naturally the friend of humans. It is the carelessness of humans that finally makes the natural object turn its back on humans. Take the short story *Luh Ayu Manik Mas* and *Raja's Mistake* as a clear example of it; the river in *Luh Ayu Manik* would not become a monster if only the people had not thrown trash into the river, and the number of casualties in *Raja's Mistake* could have been minimized if only the monarch of the country had not been consumed by anger.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the ecocritical examination of four children's short stories from Southeast Asia reveals profound connections between humans and the river/sea, uncovering both exploitative and harmonious aspects of these interactions. These stories were written by children and originate from Indonesia, Vietnam, Singapore, and

Malaysia. They illustrate a intricate dynamic between human beings and the natural environment in which they are situated. The stories underscore the anthropocentric inclinations prevalent in society, emphasizing how humans often mistreat and disregard the environment for their own convenience. These narratives shed light on the consequences that arise from neglecting the intrinsic value of the non-human world, whether through polluting rivers, participating in violent conflicts between natural forces, or perceiving the sea as an adversary.

Simultaneously, the narratives emphasize the significance of rivers and seas in shaping human life and civilization. These bodies of water hold cultural significance and serve as sources of livelihood and sustenance. They symbolize prosperity, peace, and resilience, highlighting the interconnectedness between human societies and the natural environment. Furthermore, the stories suggest that literature can cultivate environmental awareness among young individuals. By portraying the consequences of environmental ignorance and emphasizing the interdependence between humans and nature, these stories inspire a shift towards more sustainable and respectful attitudes towards the natural world. The analysis also illuminates the potential of children's literature as a powerful medium to introduce ecological concepts and foster environmental consciousness. Through an ecocritical lens, these narratives contribute to a broader discourse on the relationship between humans and the environment, encouraging readers of all ages to reconsider their responsibilities within the intricate web of the natural world.

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