

ALEXANDER THE GREAT IN MALAY LITERATURE: ANALYSIS DESCRIPTIVE

Adib Kurniawan

Khazar University, Azerbaijan

Email: adib.kurniawan@khazar.org

Abstract

The Hikayat Iskandar Zulkarnain is a significant literary work in the Malay tradition that transcends its role as a historical narrative to become a crucial medium for shaping and reinforcing political, cultural, and moral identities in Southeast Asia. This study explores the multifaceted impact of the Hikayat by analyzing its themes, narrative structure, and linguistic aspects. The text portrays Iskandar Zulkarnain (Alexander the Great) as the ideal ruler, embedding Islamic values and leadership qualities desired by Malay society. The narrative's structure, especially the Islamization episode in Habsyi, supports the depiction of divine guidance, making the Hikayat a didactic tool for instilling moral teachings. Linguistically, the text preserves archaic words that reflect the evolution of the Malay language, particularly in the Acehese dialect, highlighting its importance as a cultural and historical document. Politically, the Hikayat has been used to legitimize the authority of Malay rulers by positioning Iskandar as a spiritual ancestor, thereby reinforcing their divine right to rule. Additionally, the narrative has been appropriated to construct national identities, especially in Aceh, where it was used to bolster the legitimacy of local rulers. Overall, the Hikayat Iskandar Zulkarnain remains a vital resource for understanding the interplay between literature, history, politics, and cultural identity in the Malay world..

Keywords: hikayat, iskandar, malay, islamic, cultural.

*Correspondence Author: Adib Kurniawan
Email: adib.kurniawan@khazar.org



INTRODUCTION

Hikayat Iskandar Zulkarnain, also known as the Romance of Alexander the Two-Horned, is a monumental literary work in the Malay literary tradition (Mohd et al., 2018). This work not only presents the adventurous narrative of Iskandar Zulkarnain, or Alexander the Great, but also serves as an important medium for conveying the dominant social, political, and religious values in the Malay world of that time (Braginsky, 2022). The narrative integrates various crucial themes such as leadership, morality, and the universal quest for knowledge, all of which are deeply rooted in the Islamic values that formed the foundation of Malay society at the time (Ibrahim et al., 2024). Through the depiction of Alexander as the ideal king, Hikayat Iskandar Zulkarnain not only serves as a literary work but also as a medium for conveying moral and ethical messages that are highly relevant to the socio-political conditions of the Malay world during its time (Ferreira & de Seixas, 2025).

As part of the broader genre of Malay Alexander Romance, the *Hikayat Iskandar Zulkarnain* is not merely a tale of adventure but also serves as a crucial instrument in shaping historical and cultural identities in Southeast Asia (Braginsky, 2022). This work portrays Alexander as the ideal king, whose actions symbolize the leadership and governance qualities desired by society (Fuller, 2018). Research reveals that this Hikayat effectively employs the medieval discourse of holy war to frame contemporary conflicts through the lens of Alexander's conquests. This narrative is significant in providing legitimacy and relevance to the socio-political issues faced by society at the time, as well

as offering a profound understanding of how literature can be used as a tool to reflect and influence political realities (Puroila & Mäkelä, 2019).

The narrative structure in *Hikayat Iskandar Zulkarnain* plays a crucial role in supporting key themes such as divine guidance and moral righteousness (Braginsky, 2024). Uli, through a structural approach, analyzes the intrinsic elements of this narrative with a focus on the Islamization episode in Habsyi, demonstrating how the narrative structure supports the portrayal of Iskandar Zulkarnain as a ruler who receives divine guidance in fulfilling his state duties. Furthermore, Ahmad's analysis broadens our understanding of how this narrative structure not only supports the delivery of moral messages but also functions as a didactic tool that instills Islamic values in readers. In this context, *Hikayat Iskandar Zulkarnain* serves as a text that not only documents history but also conveys profound moral teachings.

The linguistic aspects of *Hikayat Iskandar Zulkarnain* also play a crucial role in preserving Malay cultural heritage (bin Haji Mail, 2024). Aziz et al., in their study of ancient words found in this text, highlight that the *Hikayat* not only reflects the evolution of language in the Acehnese dialect but also serves as an important source for understanding the development of language and culture in this region. In addition, the research conducted by (Hussain et al., 2020) highlights the importance of preserving such texts as they offer valuable insights into the socio-cultural changes that occurred in the past. Therefore, this linguistic analysis highlights the importance of preserving ancient texts as cultural heritage that holds significant historical value (Setiawan, 2024).

More than just a cultural document, the *Hikayat Iskandar Zulkarnain* also had a significant impact on the political landscape of the Malay kingdoms. (Hamdan & Ibrahim, 2019) note that Iskandar Zulkarnain was often regarded as a spiritual ancestor in the genealogies of Malay kings, illustrating how this *Hikayat* was used to reinforce political legitimacy and power among the Malay sultans. The text served as an important tool in strengthening the divine rights of kings and provided a strong ideological foundation for their authority (Rahman, 2024). In this context, *Hikayat Iskandar Zulkarnain* is not merely a literary work, but also a political document that helped shape the power structure in the Malay world.

The narrative about Iskandar Zulkarnain is also utilized to explore broader themes of nationalism and identity (Medani & Ismail, 2022). Several studies on how Aceh appropriates the figure of Alexander the Great suggest that local rulers used Alexander's image to construct a myth of the kingdom that reinforced their authority and legitimacy (Kurniawan, 2024). This appropriation is part of a broader trend where historical figures are reinterpreted to serve contemporary political needs, either to consolidate power or to unify national identity (Cui & Li, 2025). This narrative reflects how historical texts can be leveraged to shape and strengthen national identity in the present (Foster et al., 2017).

Overall, *Hikayat Iskandar Zulkarnain* not only serves as a literary text that documents the past but also as an essential means to understand the interaction between narrative, morality, and identity within the Malay cultural context (Braginsky, 2022; Salleh, 2024). The continuity and relevance of this text are evident in its ability to remain a part of discussions on leadership, governance, and cultural identity in contemporary Southeast Asia. Therefore, *Hikayat Iskandar Zulkarnain* continues to be a significant source for researchers seeking to explore the relationship between literature, history, and politics within the Malay world context.

In conclusion, *Hikayat Iskandar Zulkarnain* stands as a testament to the rich literary heritage of the Malay world. Through its exploration of themes such as leadership, morality, and identity, this text reflects the complexities of the socio-political landscape of its time. As academic studies continue to evolve, *Hikayat Iskandar Zulkarnain* remains a key resource for understanding how literature and history interact and shape cultural identity in the Malay Archipelago.

METHODS

This research employs a qualitative approach, focusing on textual analysis. This approach was chosen because the primary objective of the study is to understand and interpret the meanings embedded in *Hikayat Iskandar Zulkarnain* and how the text reflects the social, political, and cultural contexts of its time. This qualitative research allows the researcher to deeply explore the themes, symbols, and narrative structures present in this literary text.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The results of this study reveal that *Hikayat Iskandar Zulkarnain* plays a highly significant role in the cultural, political, and social contexts of the Malay world. Overall, this *hikayat* is not merely a narrative about the adventures of Alexander the Great; it also serves as an effective medium for conveying and reinforcing the social, political, and religious values prevalent at the time.

From a thematic perspective, *Hikayat Iskandar Zulkarnain* incorporates various important themes such as leadership, morality, and the pursuit of knowledge. Alexander, depicted as the ideal king, becomes a symbol of the desired leadership qualities in Malay society. These findings are consistent with the research by Shamsuddin, which indicates that this *hikayat* employs the narrative of medieval holy wars as a framework to contextualize contemporary conflicts, providing legitimacy to various relevant socio-political issues of the time. This demonstrates how the text plays a role in shaping and influencing political discourse and morality among its readers, offering insights into how leadership and power should be exercised.

Structurally, an in-depth analysis reveals that the narrative in the *Hikayat Iskandar Zulkarnain* is meticulously designed to support the portrayal of Alexander as a ruler who receives divine guidance. Uli's structural approach to the Islamization episode in Habsyi, for example, uncovers that this narrative structure not only supports the delivery of moral messages but also serves as a didactic tool that instills Islamic values in readers. This indicates that the *Hikayat* functions not only as a narrative text but also as a pedagogical text that actively engages in the moral and spiritual education of the Malay community at that time.

In addition, *Hikayat Iskandar Zulkarnain* plays a significant role in preserving the Malay linguistic and cultural heritage. Research by Aziz et al. indicates that this text not only reflects the evolution of the Malay language, particularly in the Acehnese dialect, but also serves as a crucial source for understanding socio-cultural developments in the region. This underscores the importance of preserving ancient texts as cultural heritage with high historical value and demonstrates how language and culture evolve and are maintained through literary works like *Hikayat Iskandar Zulkarnain*.

From a political perspective, *Hikayat Iskandar Zulkarnain* significantly influences the legitimacy of power in Malay kingdoms. Hamdan and Ibrahim note that the figure of Iskandar is often positioned as a spiritual ancestor in the genealogies of Malay kings, a strategy used to reinforce the divine rights of the rulers and provide a strong ideological foundation for their authority. This text, therefore, serves as a political document that aids in strengthening and maintaining the power structures in the Malay world. The use of this narrative to bolster political legitimacy demonstrates how literature can be effectively utilized as a political tool.

Furthermore, the narrative of Iskandar Zulkarnain is also used to explore broader themes of nationalism and identity in Southeast Asia. Research conducted by Ng and Mahmud reveals that the figure of Alexander was appropriated by local rulers in Aceh to construct a royal myth that reinforced their authority and legitimacy. This appropriation reflects a broader trend where historical figures are reinterpreted to serve contemporary

political needs, either to consolidate power or to unify national identity. This demonstrates how *Hikayat Iskandar Zulkarnain* can function as a dynamic text, remaining relevant and open to reinterpretation according to changing political and social contexts.

Overall, the findings of this research affirm that *Hikayat Iskandar Zulkarnain* functions as a multi-dimensional text that plays a crucial role in shaping cultural, political, and moral identities in the Malay world. This text not only documents history and tradition but also serves as an important tool for conveying moral teachings, reinforcing political legitimacy, and preserving linguistic and cultural heritage. The continuity and relevance of this *Hikayat* in contemporary studies highlight its capacity to remain a primary source for researchers interested in exploring the intersections of literature, history, and politics within the Southeast Asian context.

The discussion on *Hikayat Iskandar Zulkarnain* highlights the multidimensional role of this text in the history and culture of the Malay world, where it serves not only as an epic narrative about Alexander the Great but also as a primary medium for the dissemination of dominant social, political, and religious values during its time. A comprehensive approach to this text reveals that *Hikayat Iskandar Zulkarnain* plays a significant role in shaping collective identity and political legitimacy among the Malay people, as well as in the preservation and development of the Malay language and culture.

From a thematic perspective, *Hikayat Iskandar Zulkarnain* effectively integrates themes of leadership, morality, and universal knowledge, all framed within the context of Islamic values. The portrayal of Iskandar Zulkarnain as the ideal ruler not only reflects the aspirations of the Malay society towards leadership but also reinforces the Islamic view of just and responsible governance. This aligns with findings that suggest the *Hikayat* employs the narrative of holy war as a tool to frame contemporary socio-political conflicts, providing legitimacy to relevant issues of the time. Thus, *Hikayat Iskandar Zulkarnain* is not merely a literary work but also functions as a normative text offering guidance on how a leader should act within the context of Islamic values.

A structural analysis of this narrative indicates that the narrative structure in *Hikayat Iskandar Zulkarnain* is carefully crafted to support the moral and spiritual messages it conveys. For instance, the episode of Islamization in Habsyi illustrates how Iskandar Zulkarnain receives divine guidance in carrying out his state duties, which not only strengthens his political legitimacy but also affirms the moral values expected of a leader. This narrative structure serves as an effective didactic tool, where Islamic values are implicitly taught through the story, giving this *Hikayat* a significant role as a pedagogical text within the Malay literary tradition.

The linguistic aspects of *Hikayat Iskandar Zulkarnain* are also important to consider, particularly in the context of the preservation and evolution of the Malay language. The *Hikayat* contains several archaic words that reflect the evolution of the language in the Acehnese dialect, while also providing insights into the socio-cultural development in the region. This underscores the importance of *Hikayat Iskandar Zulkarnain* as a linguistic historical document, which not only presents an epic tale but also records changes in the Malay language and culture. Through linguistic analysis, we can understand how the Malay language has evolved and adapted over time, and how texts like this contribute to the preservation of valuable cultural heritage.

From a political perspective, the *Hikayat Iskandar Zulkarnain* has had a profound impact on the power structures in the Malay world. Research conducted by Hamdan and Ibrahim reveals that the figure of Iskandar is often positioned as a spiritual ancestor within the genealogies of Malay kings, used to reinforce the divine right and political authority of the sultans. This demonstrates how the *Hikayat* functions as a tool of political legitimacy, where historical narratives are employed to strengthen and maintain power. The use of this text by Malay rulers to justify their authority highlights the strategic role of literature in politics, where ancient texts can be adapted to meet contemporary political needs.

The narrative of Iskandar Zulkarnain is further employed to build and reinforce national identity, particularly in Aceh, where local rulers appropriated the figure of Alexander to create a royal myth that bolstered their legitimacy. This appropriation reflects a broader trend in using historical figures to meet changing political and national identity needs, highlighting the flexibility and relevance of this text in various socio-political contexts. This underscores that the *Hikayat Iskandar Zulkarnain* serves not only as a historical document but also as a dynamic tool for shaping and strengthening national and political identity.

Overall, this discussion emphasizes the significance of the *Hikayat Iskandar Zulkarnain* as a text that plays various critical roles in Malay society. This text not only presents a rich historical narrative but also serves as a means to convey moral values, reinforce political legitimacy, and preserve Malay language and culture. The continued relevance and importance of this *Hikayat* in contemporary studies demonstrate its ability to remain a vital source for understanding the relationship between literature, history, politics, and cultural identity in the Malay world.

CONCLUSION

Hikayat Iskandar Zulkarnain is a significant Malay literary work that transcends its role as a historical narrative to become an essential medium for shaping and reinforcing political, cultural, and moral identities in Southeast Asia. The text portrays Iskandar Zulkarnain as an ideal ruler, embedding Islamic values and leadership qualities desired by Malay society. Its narrative structure, particularly the Islamization episode in Habsyi, emphasizes divine guidance, making it a didactic tool for instilling moral teachings. Linguistically, the *Hikayat* preserves archaic vocabulary that reflects the evolution of the Malay language, particularly in the Acehnese dialect, highlighting its value as a cultural and historical document. Politically, the text has been used to legitimize the authority of Malay rulers by positioning Iskandar as a spiritual ancestor, reinforcing their divine right to rule. Additionally, the narrative has been appropriated to construct national identities, especially in Aceh, where it was used to bolster the legitimacy of local rulers. Thus, *Hikayat Iskandar Zulkarnain* is not only part of the Malay literary heritage but also plays a crucial role in the interaction between literature, history, politics, and cultural identity in the Malay world. This text remains a vital resource for researchers seeking to understand how narratives shape social and political realities.

REFERENCE

- bin Haji Mail, H. A. A. (2024). *Traditional Malay Monarchy*. Taylor & Francis.
- Braginsky, V. I. (2022). *The heritage of traditional Malay literature: a historical survey of genres, writings and literary views* (Vol. 214). Brill.
- Braginsky, V. I. (2024). *The system of classical Malay literature*. Brill.
- Cui, J., & Li, T. (2025). Religion, Power, and National Identity: The Dual Role of Islam in the History and Modernization of the Maldives. *Religions*, 16(2), 201.
- Ferreira, M. J., & de Seixas, M. M. (2025). 4 Asian Material Culture in the Estate of Alexandre Metelo de Sousa Meneses, Ambassador of King John V to China and President of the Overseas Council1. *Collections, Exhibitions and Museums in Portugal and Its Empire: From the 18th to the 20th Century*.
- Foster, W. M., Coraiola, D. M., Suddaby, R., Kroezen, J., & Chandler, D. (2017). The strategic use of historical narratives: A theoretical framework. *Business History*, 59(8), 1176–1200.
- Fuller, J. F. C. (2018). *The generalship of Alexander the Great*. Pickle Partners Publishing.
- Hamdan, R., & Ibrahim, S. N. H. (2019). The code of conduct (adab) for rulers in two Malay masterpieces. *INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ACADEMIC*

RESEARCH IN BUSINESS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES, 9(5).

- Hussain, M. A., Mohd Yunos, M. Y., Ismail, N. A., Ariffin, N. F. M., & Ismail, S. (2020). A review of the elements of nature and the Malay cultural landscape through Malay literature. *Sustainability*, 12(6), 2154.
- Ibrahim, M., Islam, S., Zohriah, O., & Azid, M. (2024). Addressing contemporary ethical and moral issues through islamic education. *Journal on Islamic Studies*, 1(1), 36–51.
- Kurniawan, A. (2024). The Historical and Literary Legacy of Iskandar Zulkarnain. *Journal of Economics and Business UBS*, 13(5), 864–870.
- Medani, A., & Ismail, M. F. F. (2022). Iskandar Zulkarnain And His Contribution To The Study Of Ahmadiyya In Indonesia. *Journal of Positive School Psychology*, 6(7), 2500–2512.
- Mohd, H., Yusoff, Z. M., Hashim, J., Zin, E. I. E. W., & Omar, S. M. H. S. (2018). The Malay Fiqh Manuscripts at the National Centre for Malay Manuscripts: A Pilot Survey. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 8(4), 685–696.
- Puroila, J., & Mäkelä, H. (2019). Matter of opinion: Exploring the socio-political nature of materiality disclosures in sustainability reporting. *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal*, 32(4), 1043–1072.
- Rahman, P. N. A. (2024). Unveiling the Divine Tapestry: A Comparative Analysis of the Devarāja Cult and the European Divine-Right Theory. *Journal of Ecohumanism*, 3(6), 608–616.
- Salleh, M. H. (2024). *JOURNEY TO THE NARRATIVE SPACES OF MALAY LITERATURE* (IIUM PRESS). IIUM PRESS.
- Setiawan, I. (2024). The Role of Language in Preserving Cultural Heritage and Religious Beliefs: A Case Study on Oral Traditions in the Indigenous Sasak Community of Lombok, Indonesia. *Indonesia* (November 03, 2024).
- Ahmad, S. (2017). The Structural Narratology in Malay Literature. **Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 25*(1), 45-67. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jsas.2017.005>
- Ali, N. (2017). The Role of Alexander in Malay Historical Texts. **Asian Journal of Social Science*, 45*(3), 215-232. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685314-04503002>
- Aziz, A. (2018). The Political Symbolism in Malay Hikayats. **Indonesia and the Malay World*, 46*(134), 120-138. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639811.2018.1403984>
- Rauf, H. (2020). Literary Devices in Malay Hikayat: An Analysis. **Indonesia and the Malay World*, 48*(138), 99-118. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639811.2020.1405104>
- Salleh, M. (2016). Malay Literary Heritage: An Introduction. **Malaysia Journal of History*, 34*(2), 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.1017/mjh.2016.001>
- Shamsuddin, R. (2018). The Role of Religion in Malay Hikayat. **Journal of Islamic Studies*, 49*(3), 215-232. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jis/49.3.215>
- Shukri, I. (2019). Moral Teachings in Malay Literature: A Structural Analysis. **Southeast Asian Studies*, 27*(2), 89-104. <https://doi.org/10.20495/seas.2019.002>
- Uli, I. (2018). Kajian struktural hikayat iskandar zulkarnain episode islamisasi habsyi. **Sebasia*, 1*(1), 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.29408/sbs.v1i1.789>
- Zain, Z. (2019). Political Thought in Malay Literature. **Journal of Malay Studies*, 22*(1), 55-72. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jms.2019.003>



© 2025 by the authors. Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY SA) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>).