

Comic as Poetic Mirror: A Study of Malay Imagery in the Comic Mat Gila and the Verse of Usman Awang

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.91200134>

Received: 14 December 2025; Accepted: 23 December 2025; Published: 03 January 2026

ABSTRAK

Rejabhad, famously known as the *Penghulu Kartun Malaysia* (Chief of Malaysian Cartoons), is well known for his distinctive cartoon style that portrays everyday life and dramas reflecting Malay-Nusantara cultural imagery. This study aims to explore and identify the representation of Malay culture as depicted in the classic comic *Periwira Mat Gila Vol. 2* by the late Rejabhad, referencing the famous poem *Melayu* written by National Laureate, the late Usman Awang. The study adopts a qualitative methodology based on the Four-Level Framing Theory introduced by Dimitrova & Rodriguez (2011), encompassing description, analysis, interpretation, and evaluation as a guide in examining the work. The findings reveal that the imagery conveyed in *Periwira Mat Gila* serves as a symbolic representation of Malayness, resonating with both the explicit and implicit expressions found in Usman Awang's poem.

Keywords: Malay culture, Rejabhad, Usman Awang, comic representation, framing theory

INTRODUCTION

Comics or cartoons are categorized as a form of Visual Literature (Supyan Hussin, 2018) because they involve drawings or sketches that simulate stories with elements such as conflict, antagonists and protagonists, satire, and humor. Historically, readers were first introduced to comics through political cartoons in newspapers (editorial cartoons) and comic strips (Eisner, 2008). Comics, like poetry, focus on the aesthetic arrangement of audiovisual segments, whereas other literary fields emphasize syntax over spatial composition (Bennet, 2014).

Poetry, as we know, is a medium closely tied to Malay culture. It is a literary form that expresses the poet's thoughts and emotions imaginatively, utilizing the full power of language through both external and internal structures (Herman J. Waluyo, 1995).

Today, visual cultural representation has become increasingly important in communicating information through images to audiences who wish to understand something more deeply. Expressions often seen on social media such as "I'm too lazy to read, can you draw it instead?" are humorously used by internet users who prefer visual content to lengthy texts. However, comics differ in that readers tend to engage with them fully. According to Lim (2010), reading comics is not a fragmented activity; it is a form of visual storytelling, a historical reflection, and readers interpret them subjectively based on their sociocultural background.

The choice of *Periwira Mat Gila* stems from its popularity as a serialized comic published in *Gila-Gila* magazine during the late 1980s, created by the late cartoonist Rejabhad. This study seeks to explore how the famous poem *Melayu* by National Laureate Usman Awang is interpreted and visualized in Rejabhad's most iconic work. Rejabhad's cartoons are renowned for their rich depiction of Malay identity and humor, while Usman Awang (or Tongkat Warrant) is known for his socialist ideals reflected in his protest-themed poems and short stories

that transcend borders of nation and race (Nur Amirah Che Soh, 2016). Hence, both artists were chosen to help examine the representation of Malay identity through their respective works.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Malay Cartoons and Rejabhad

Malay cartoons, which emerged before Malaysia's independence, served as both entertainment and a means to evoke nationalism among Malays (Mulyadi, 2004). In general, the creation of comics and cartoons is deeply connected to culture, sociology, and cognition (Ahmad, 2019). Cartoons function as a cultural element using language to communicate, even those without dialogue rely on expressive visuals (Puteri Roselina, 2003). For Rejabhad, Malay cultural imagery was close to his heart after his service in the army. His works embody his 3M philosophy: menghibur (entertain), mengajar (educate), and menyedarkan (awaken awareness).

Before joining Gila-Gila magazine as a cartoonist in 1978, he served as editor of Ha Hu Hum magazine in 1974 (Sofian, 2014). He produced several cartoon series later compiled into volumes, including his most popular work, Periwira Mat Gila, which spans three volumes. Rejabhad's strength lies in his combination of artistic visuals and narrative storytelling, particularly through language (Julina, 2020). His cartoons are known for their sharp satire and social critique, often represented through iconic characters such as Periwira Mat Gila, a clever trickster admired for his wit and deceptive humor. This has inspired the researcher to analyze how Rejabhad's visual presentation reflects Malay imagery.

Usman Awang and Modern Malay Poetry

Poetry, including sajak, syair, and pantun, is a creative literary form (Salwani, 2009) and an essential aspect of language and literature (Iqbal, 2023). According to Mohamad Shaidan & Shaiful Bahri Md. Radzi (2020), modern Malay poetry began to emerge in the early 1930s, though some scholars trace its roots back to Omar Mustaffa's poem *Angan-angan dengan Gurindam* published in Utusan Melayu in 1913 (Rahman, 2005). Modern poetry is considered an extension of traditional Malay poetic forms such as syair and pantun.

Dato' Usman Awang, recognized as a National Laureate in 1983, was a prolific poet known for his humanitarian themes. He was not only a language advocate but also a defender of his people (PTAR UiTM, 2025). Active in the 1950s, he gained fame for his modern poems (Rahman, 2005). According to him, the primary function of language in poetry is to create beauty and subtlety, attracting readers through its artistic charm (Muhamar Awang, 2020). Writing during the colonial era influenced his use of symbolism to convey deeper messages (Nur Amirah Che Soh, 2016). He was also known as the People's Poet for his works on struggle, patriotism, and Malay identity.

Malay Imagery Through Poetry

The relationship between poetic and visual expression forms a longstanding artistic tradition, with origins that can be traced back to classical antiquity and experiencing a notable revival during the Renaissance. This enduring relationship can be easily expressed in the essential aphorism, which characterizes poetry as a "speaking picture" and painting as a "silent poem." (Diyanni via Asmaa, 2012), a concept that underscores the deep-seated ambition to transcend the boundaries of individual media. This dialogic impulse has historically manifested in forms such as visual poetry. According to Prohm (2013), this arose from purposeful investigations of the written form, resulting in works in which visual arrangement and textual meaning are intimately linked. While this established lineage confirms a rich field of interdisciplinary inquiry, scholarly attention has often centered on Western canons or on formal experimentation within a single cultural context.

Within this broader historical framework, a distinct research gap can be identified. Existing scholarship has extensively documented various modes of visual experimentation in poetry, including the use of innovative typography, calligraphy, and the integration of illustrated verse. However, there remains a paucity of critical analysis concerning the intersemiotic translation, the transposition of meaning from one sign system to another, between Malay poetic texts and the medium of comic art. This gap is particularly salient given the capacity of

comics to operate as a complex narrative system that combines image, text, and sequence, thereby offering a potent, yet under-theorized, site for the visual reinterpretation of literary works. The unique aesthetic and cultural codes of Malay literature present a compelling case for such an investigation.

The goal of the current study is to close this discovered gap. By focusing specifically on Usman Awang's seminal poem *Melayu* and Rejabhad's contemporary comic *Periwira Mat Gila*, this research moves beyond a simple comparison to investigate whether a process of cultural and visual translation occurs between these two distinct works. The investigation will analyze the mechanisms through which the thematic depth, cultural nuances, and ideological weight of the poetic source are transposed, reinterpreted, or potentially subverted within the multimodal framework of the comic. The objective is to discover if Rejabhad's artwork operates as a critical, visual reading of Awang's vision of Malay identity, thereby adding a new viewpoint to the study of Malaysian visual culture and interconnection.

METHODOLOGY

This paper undertakes a visual analysis of selected panels from *Periwira Mat Gila* Vol. 2, curated specifically for their illustrative capacity to represent potent Malay cultural imagery. The selection criteria prioritize visual sequences that are emblematic of broader socio-cultural narratives, thereby providing a focused corpus for investigating the construction of identity. The primary objective of this examination is to deconstruct how these specific comic art visuals engage with and potentially reconfigure established tropes of "Malayness."

To facilitate a structured inquiry, this study employs the Four-Level Framing Theory as proposed by Rodriguez and Dimitrova (2011). This theoretical framework provides a systematic methodology for dissecting visual communication by segmenting analysis into four distinct, yet interconnected, stages: the denotative system, which identifies the literal, objective elements present; the stylistic-semiotic system, which examines the artistic style and conventional signs; the connotative system, which interprets the associated, culturally-specific meanings; and finally, the ideological structure, which uncovers the embedded values and power relations. This multi-layered approach is instrumental in moving beyond a superficial reading of the imagery to a more profound understanding of its communicative depth.

The application of this framework is directed towards a critical exploration of how *Periwira Mat Gila* visually articulates a conception of Malay identity. The analytical process will trace the progression from the denotative elements of the selected panels through to their ideological implications, ultimately aiming to situate the comic's visual rhetoric in dialogue with the literary conception of Malay identity famously articulated by Usman Awang in his poem *Melayu*. Through this comparative lens, the study seeks to elucidate the continuities and divergences in the representation of Malayness across different media and historical contexts, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of the evolving visual discourse on identity within contemporary Malaysian popular culture.

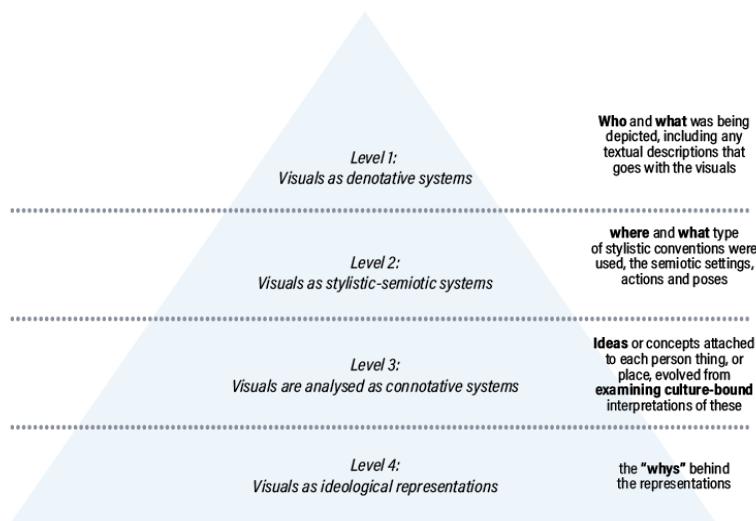


Fig. 1. Rodriguez & Dimitrova Framing Theory (2011).

Analysis

Periwira Mat Gila was originally serialized in the iconic Malaysian humor publication, Gila-Gila magazine, from 1985 to 1989. The narrative's publication history is itself indicative of its significant cultural resonance. Initially, the creator, Rejabhad, conceived a finite storyline that would conclude with the death of the protagonist. However, the series garnered overwhelming public popularity, leading to direct editorial intervention that compelled its continuation. This demand resulted in the narrative's extension, ultimately unfolding across three distinct volumes and reflecting the work's embedded status within the popular consciousness of the era.

The narrative chronicles the adventures of its eponymous hero, a village youth renowned for his reliance on cleverness and deceptive tricks to navigate challenges and outsmart his adversaries. Despite his marriage into royalty, Mat Gila is consistently characterized by his preference for a simple, unpretentious life, explicitly expressing a distaste for the formalities and constraints of the palace. The plot's illustrations trace his entire life journey, which is marked by significant mobility and social crossing. This arc begins with his initial deception of Raja Gontor, leads to his marriage to a princess, his subsequent voluntary departure from the palace to experience common life working in a Felda settlement, and his eventual, compelled return in response to a royal command.

Table 1. Table Analysis

Illustration	Poem Quotes	Analysis
I.	<p>Malay Language:</p> <p><i>Meski telah memiliki telaga Tangan masih memegang tali Sedang orang mencapai timba. Berbuahlah pisang tiga kali</i></p> <p>Melayu itu masih bermimpi</p> <p>English Translation:</p> <p>Though one already owns a well, One's hand still clings to the rope While another fetches the bucket. Should the banana fruit thrice, The Malay would still be dreaming.</p>	<p>Level 1</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. The scene inside the house at the Settlement (Tanah Rancangan) where Periwira Mat Gila lives with his wife. ii. A conversation between Mat Gila and his wife. <p>Level 2</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Mat Gila is lying down, wrapped in a blanket, refusing to get out of bed. ii. His wife (the Princess) asks her husband to get up and go find work. <p>Level 3</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Mat Gila lies down intending to sleep while waiting for his crops to bear fruit, but his wife disagrees.
II.	<p>Malay Language:</p> <p>Berkelahi cara Melayu</p>	<p>Level 1</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. The scene shows two small-built men fighting outside the palace.

<p>III.</p>	<p>Menikam dengan pantun</p> <p>Menyanggah dengan senyum</p> <p><i>Marahnya dengan diam</i></p> <p><i>Merendah bukan menyembah</i></p> <p><i>Meninggi bukan melonjak.</i></p> <p>English Translation:</p> <p>Fighting in the Malay way</p> <p>Stabbing with verses</p> <p>Parrying with a smile</p> <p>Anger expressed through silence</p> <p>Humbling without bowing</p> <p>Rising high, not leaping.</p>	<p>Level 2</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> The first man threatens the second man with a verse of pantun (a traditional Malay poetic form) to challenge him to a duel. The second man remains calm, replying with his own pantun, saying that he is merely waiting for the first man to make the first move. <p>Level 3</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> The first man, named Raja Gontor, has curly mustache tips, a central hair tuft, arched eyebrows, wears a short-sleeved baju sikap (traditional Malay attire), and has a fierce-looking face. The second man appears calm, has thin hair, wears a vest without an inner shirt, sports a fine mustache, and is the servant of Periwira Mat Gila.
<p>IV.</p>	<p>Malay Language:</p> <p>Melayu itu kaya falsafahnya</p> <p>Kias kata bidal pusaka</p> <p>Akar budi bersulamkan daya</p> <p>Gedung akal laut bicara</p> <p>English Translation:</p> <p>The Malays are rich in their philosophy</p> <p>Figurative words, inherited proverbs</p> <p>Roots of virtue embroidered with vigor</p>	<p>Level 1</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> The scene inside Periwira Mat Gila's palace. A conversation between two men and an elderly woman <p>Level 2</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> The first man speaks in riddles, as if giving a warning, fearing future regret. The second man and the elderly woman appear stunned by the first man's words. Both seem on the verge of embracing <p>Level 3</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> The first man, bald-headed, dressed in a luxurious long-sleeved baju sikap (traditional Malay attire) and wearing a pelikat sarong, is Periwira Mat Gila. The second man, also bald-headed, wears a tanjak (traditional Malay headcloth), a short-sleeved baju Melayu, and regular trousers —

	A treasury of reason, a sea of discourse	he is Mat Gila's long-lost twin brother, Mat Sasau. iii. The elderly woman, wearing a long kebaya blouse paired with a batik sarong and a single bun on her head, is the mother of Mat Gila and Mat Sasau.
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Level 4

Frame I depicts a situation where Periwira becomes a husband who suddenly turns lazy after supposedly working hard to cultivate the Settlement (Tanah Rancangan) that he and his wife had opened together (the Settlement here refers to the FELDA Land Scheme). His wife, who is a royal princess, persuades and urges Mat Gila to go out and find work to support their living expenses while waiting for their crops to yield results. Stanza 6 of the poem “Melayu” mentions the laziness of the Malays after receiving wealth (even though the success or outcome has not yet been confirmed).

Frames II and III portray the situation before Mat Gila and his wife left the palace to settle in the Land Scheme. King Gontor wanted to challenge the man he believed to be Mat Gila to a fight, thinking that Mat Gila had taken the princess away from him. However, the one he faced was not Mat Gila himself, but rather Mat Gila's servant who had disguised himself as Mat Gila. Both of them began by exchanging pantun (traditional Malay poetic verses) before the fight took place. In his poem, Usman Awang writes about how Malays confront conflicts in a distinctly Malay way—by “stabbing with pantun.” This reflects what we often imagine from old Malay tales or classic films—that Malays remain courteous even in conflict, “countering with a smile,” just as Mat Gila's servant did even though King Gontor came with the intent to kill him.

Meanwhile, Frame IV introduces the appearance of a mysterious man who calls himself Mat Sasau, who turns out to be Periwira Mat Gila's twin brother. Mat Gila's mother almost confirms that he is indeed her long-lost son, but Mat Gila remains doubtful. He fears that the man only resembles him but is not truly his twin. He says, “Do not swallow honey too quickly, it may be poisoned; not everything that glitters is a diamond, it might just be a stone by the roadside. Before you swallow, make sure the honey is truly honey, and the diamond truly a diamond—lest you regret it later.” These words from Mat Gila align with what Usman Awang expresses in the final stanzas of his poem—that the Malays are rich in philosophy, speaking with wisdom and intellect. Although his mother has no doubts that Mat Sasau is her long-lost son, separated from her husband long ago, Mat Gila refuses to let her believe it immediately without first verifying the truth.

CONCLUSION

Through the poem “Melayu”, National Laureate Usman Awang both praises the positive traits and critically examines the negative attitudes of the Malay people. This is similar to what the cartoonist Rejabhad does in his comic Periwira Mat Gila, where he frequently uses traditional Malay proverbs to highlight the essence of Malay identity. Representation plays a crucial role in conveying messages, and in this regard, Rejabhad successfully delivers it through Periwira Mat Gila. His meticulousness in portraying the characteristics and behaviors of the Malay people reflects a balanced and authentic depiction. Through this study, it is evident that comics are not merely a source of entertainment but can also serve as an effective medium of visual communication in expressing Malay ideas and philosophy.

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