

Hijau (Green): A reflection of a song that sings for the forest, cries for the future

Abstract

This reflection note explores the cultural, educational, and ecological significance of the original Malaysian-made song *Hijau* (Green), famously performed by Zainal Abidin but composed and written by the lesser-known yet pivotal figure, Mukhlis Mohamed Nor (MMN) or just known as Mukhlis Nor. Drawing from personal experience as a university professor and educator, I revisit how *Hijau*, in which I first encountered during secondary school in the 1990s, that continues to resonate as a timeless ecological message. Through its lyrical depth, regional dialect, and poetic structure, *Hijau* captures pressing issues such as deforestation, pollution, ozone depletion, and moral decay with remarkable foresight. More than just a song, *Hijau* is framed here as a form of environmental education, emotional protest, and intergenerational lament. Its impact in the classroom is also discussed, highlighting how the song serves as a teaching tool in educational courses. Special emphasis is given to recognising MMN as the true creator of this musical and ecological masterpiece, a composer whose contribution has often been overlooked in favour of the performer. This reflection argues for the continued sharing and teaching of *Hijau*, and for the rightful honouring of MMN as a national voice of ecological conscience. I salute you indeed!

Keywords: environmental songs, composer, environmental education, ecological reflection, Malaysian music

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Introduction

I first heard the song *Hijau* (Green) when I was in my secondary school during the 1990s. Back then, I didn't analyse it but I simply felt it. Something about the melody lingered in my memory. Years later, I searched for it, played it again, and suddenly the meaning struck me. The lyrics: "*Bumi yang tiada rimba, seumpama hamba*" ("A land without forests is like a slave."), that express exactly what we need to hear and say. To ourselves. To our students. To anyone who still believes we have time to ignore the damage.

The melody is remarkably captivating and emotionally engaging. Although it is difficult to fully articulate its appeal, the composition possesses a rare ability to evoke reflection, serenity, and environmental awareness simultaneously. Its aesthetic beauty extends beyond entertainment, offering listeners an opportunity to contemplate the relationship between humanity and nature. But sometimes, the simplest words hold the deepest truths. *Hijau* is powerful and beautiful. It brings no stress, only clarity. It teaches in ways no lecture can. This song should be shared with our students. This song isn't just a piece of music, it is a great combination of environmental education, poetry, a warning, and a prayer. And it deserves to be passed on. This song is an elegy.

Through this reflection, I hope to honour the brilliance behind it, not only Zainal Abidin who brought it to life, but Mukhlis Mohamed Nor (MMN) or just known as Mukhlis Nor, the man who composed every note and wrote every line who is the unsung hero behind *Hijau*.²

MMN is widely recognised within the Malaysian music industry as a gifted composer and lyricist whose works often combine poetic expression with social commentary. Through *Hijau*, MMN demonstrated remarkable foresight by transforming environmental concerns into an accessible musical narrative, allowing ecological issues to reach audiences beyond scientific and policy circles.

The ecology of lyrics: poetry with a purpose

Figure 1 provides a visual ecology of how lyric poetry functions as an ethical argument, using a case study of MMN's lyrics alongside broader eco-musicology research. On the left, the diagram maps specific environmental wounds within Nor's lyrics: the visual elements of deforested land and polluted air illustrate how text like "*Bumi yang tiada rimba, seumpama hamba*" acts as a profound metaphor for environmental degradation. As shown in Figure 1, the arrow points from these detailed textual interpretations to the conclusion that while the "music is gentle," the explicit environmental imagery within the verse "stabs" the listener, effectively heightening their perception of ecological risk and moral duty.

Figure 1 further contextually maps these functions through distinct academic studies across diverse musical genres, located on the right side of Figure 1. Lyric poetry, as a mode of ethical argument, "names harm," "locates responsibility," and "evokes care," concepts echoed in studies of eco-musicology.¹³ For example, Figure 1 connects traditional repertoires, such as the Sundanese song *Kuring Leungiteum*, to "ecological mourning," where melodic contours complement literal loss.⁴ Similarly, genres like thrash metal use dystopian tropes to critique techno-hubris,³ and contemporary Kiswahili songs fold environmental vocabulary into compressed, memorable refrains,¹⁴ illustrating how diverse forms of aesthetic compression amplify civic pedagogy.

The song begins with a bitter truth: "*Bumi yang tiada rimba, seumpama hamba. Dia dicemar manusia, yang jahil ketawa.*" (A land without forests is like a slave. It is polluted by humans, while the ignorant laugh.) MMN does not use grand metaphors here; he uses wounds. Forests are no longer homes of biodiversity; they are slaves. And the oppressor is none other than us, humans "Yang jahil ketawa" (Laughing in ignorance). The music is gentle, but the message stabs.

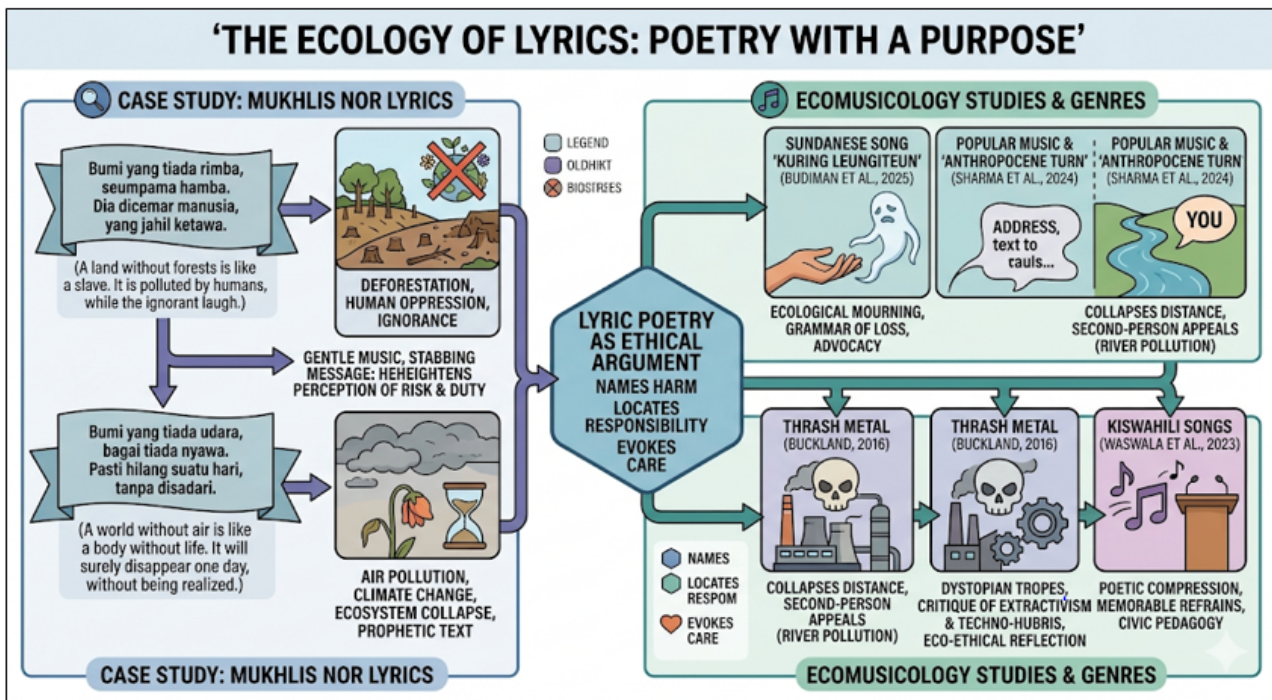


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework Illustrating the Eco-Ethical Themes Embedded in the Lyrics of Hijau and Their Connections to Environmental Communication Literature. Note: This figure is a conceptual synthesis developed from interpretations of the lyrics of Hijau and relevant literature in eco-musicology and environmental communication. It is intended as a visual representation of ideas discussed in the text and does not present original empirical data. The diagram was generated using Google Gemini and subsequently reviewed and revised by the author

It continues: “*Bumi yang tiada udara, bagai tiada nyawa. Pasti hilang suatu hari, tanpa disadari.*” (A world without air is like a body without life. It will surely disappear one day, without being realized.) These lines are not only prophetic. They are terrifying in their clarity. MMN foresaw the crises of air pollution, climate change, and ecosystem collapse; years before these became national conversations. He gave them voice through verse.

Lyric poetry can function as ethical argument when it names harm, locates responsibility, and evokes care. Studies in eco-musicology show that songs which bind vivid environmental imagery to moral language heighten listeners’ perception of ecological risk and duty.¹³ Traditional repertoires frequently encode “ecological mourning,” where melodic contour and vocal timbre carry a grammar of loss that complements the literal text, as seen in the Sundanese song *Kuring Leungiteun* analysed as a vehicle for advocacy in the face of crisis.⁴

Popular music has likewise taken an “Anthropocene turn,” translating river pollution and hydrological decline into intimate, second-person appeals that collapse distance between the listener and the damaged watershed.¹² Even ostensibly hard-edged genres such as thrash metal mobilize dystopian tropes to critique extractivism and techno-hubris, demonstrating that aesthetic intensity can scaffold eco-ethical reflection.³ In East Africa, contemporary Kiswahili songs fold environmental vocabulary into memorable refrains, showing how poetic compression amplifies civic pedagogy.¹⁴

Environmental education through music

Figure 2 illustrates how musical works like Hijau transcend entertainment to function as a primary vehicle for ecological literacy. By contrasting “mature minds” (science and technology) with “immature hearts,” the diagram in Figure 2 highlights the gap

between technical knowledge and ethical wisdom. This conceptual framework supports the idea that music acts as a “song for purpose,” educating audiences more effectively than traditional textbooks. As shown in Figure 2, classroom interventions that pair lyric analysis with reflective writing and local action projects have been shown to measurably improve students’ environmental perceptions and their intentions to adopt pro-ecological behaviours.^{13,15}

The lower portion of Figure 2 maps the practical application of “eco-musicality” and its integration into formal education. This includes a concrete skill set for courses, such as attentive listening to more-than-human soundscapes and instrument-making with natural materials.⁹ Figure 2 also highlights global examples, such as the use of I-san folk songs in Thailand to increase natural-resource awareness among school-age audiences.^{5,8}

While Figure 2 notes that universities report parallel gains in ecological consciousness, it also acknowledges the practical constraints instructors face, such as limited training time and resources,⁷ emphasizing that a song like *Hijau* operates essentially as a living curriculum.

Hijau has educated more young Malaysians about environmental loss than any textbook. MMN designed this carefully. It is not only a song to entertain but also it is a lesson in ecological literacy. “*Apalah gunanya kematangan fikiran, bila di jiwa kita masih lagi muda dan mentah?*” (What is the use of having a mature mind, if in our hearts we are still young and immature?) This question still lingers in every environmental summit today. We have science, degrees, and technologies, yet we behave like we understand nothing. This song lyric show what human possess is a shame. It reflects the sorrow of a society that has grown smart, but not wise.

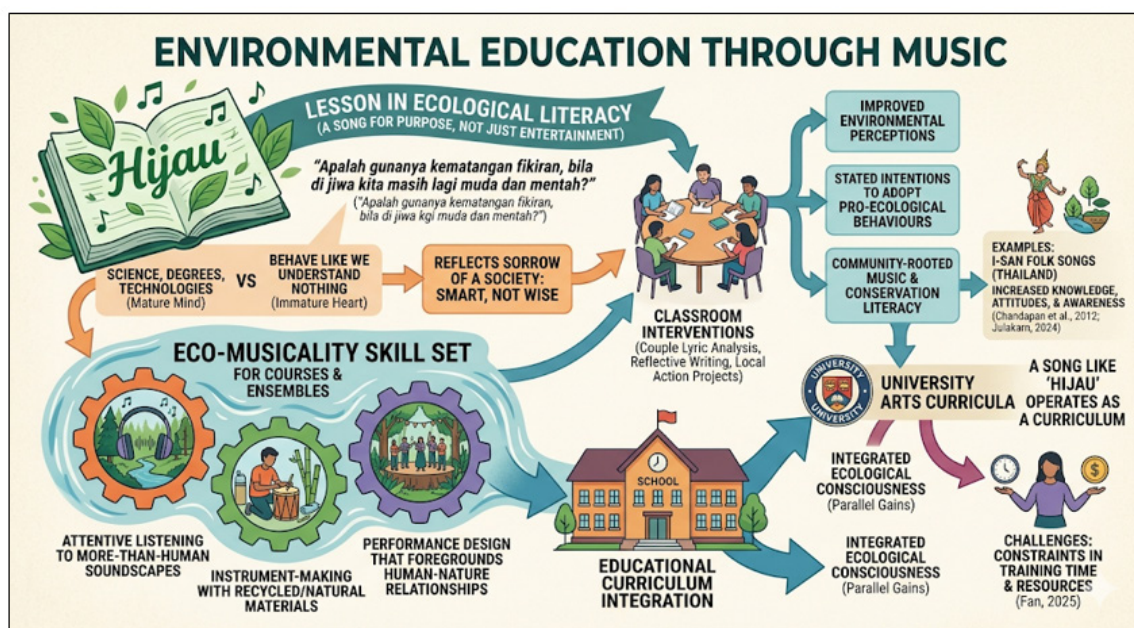


Figure 2 Conceptual Model of Environmental Education Through Music Based on Published Studies of Ecological Literacy, Eco-Musicality, and Community-Based Environmental Learning. Note: This figure visually synthesizes concepts reported in the literature, including studies by ^{5,8,13,15}. The figure serves as an interpretative educational framework rather than a presentation of original research findings. The diagram was generated using Google Gemini and subsequently reviewed and revised by the author.

Research on “eco-musicality” proposes a concrete skill set for courses and ensembles: attentive listening to more-than-human soundscapes, instrument-making with recycled or natural materials, and performance design that foregrounds human–nature relationships.⁹ Classroom interventions that couple lyric analysis with reflective writing and local action projects improve students’ environmental perceptions and stated intentions to adopt pro-ecological behaviours.^{13,15} Community-rooted music can also elevate conservation literacy among school-age audiences; production of I-san folk songs in Thailand, for example, measurably increased knowledge, attitudes, and awareness about natural-resource protection.^{5,8} Universities report parallel gains when ecological consciousness is integrated into arts curricula, though instructors still face constraints in training time and resources.⁷ Together these findings clarify how a song like *Hijau* operates not only as art but as curriculum.

The people’s lament: dialect as protest

Figure 3 illustrates how the use of regional dialect, specifically the Kelantanese phrases used by MMN, serves to ground environmental ethics in “lived place.” By moving away from standard Malay, the lyrics depicted in Figure 2—such as the lament for children who can no longer bathe in the sea (mandi laok)—transform an abstract environmental crisis into a raw, unfiltered “rural cry.” This visual mapping shows that the loss of kampung life to development is not merely a physical change but a moral one that targets the listener’s conscience. As indicated in Figure 3, this “people’s protest” identifies *maknuso* (humankind) as the direct cause of atmospheric degradation, effectively framing the thinning ozone layer as a piercing wound to the local community.

The broader ethnomusicological significance of these linguistic choices is further detailed in the lower half of Figure 3. The use of “civic vernaculars” is a proven method for democratizing access to conservation discourse, as seen in Kiswahili environmental songs that

utilize familiar idioms to engage the public.¹⁴ Figure 3 also draws a parallel to planting songs in Rote society, which transmit practical ecological knowledge, such as soil care and seasonal timing, across generations.¹¹ Ultimately, Figure 3 demonstrates that when protest is voiced in a regional tongue, it collapses the distance between the listener and the damaged landscape, encouraging audiences to recognize themselves as “implicated stewards” rather than detached spectators.

One of the most powerful sections of the song comes not in standard Malay, but in Kelantanese dialect: “*Anok-anok tok leh meghaso mandi laok, bersaing main ghama-ghama...*” (Children can no longer feel the joy of bathing in the sea, competing and playing together...) MMN’s genius lies in including this voice from the margins which is an environmental lament sung in a regional tongue. It’s raw, unfiltered, and deeply local. Children can no longer swim in the sea, nor play like they once did. The innocence of kampung life is lost, not to war, but to development.

“*Ozon lo ni koho nipih nak aghi, keno make asak hok biso, weh pase maknuso.....*” where ‘maknuso’ represents the Kelantanese dialect pronunciation of the Standard Malay word ‘manusia’ (humankind). The deliberate use of dialect reinforces the song’s grounding in local identity and lived environmental experience.’ (The ozone layer is getting thinner day by day, pierced by the toxic smoke released by humans...). This verse doesn’t need a journal reference. It is the truth. We breathe toxic smoke. The ozone weakens. And it is because of maknuso (humankind). Here, MMN doesn’t just write for the mind. He writes for the conscience. This is a people’s protest, a rural cry in the face of environmental colonisation.

Using dialect is not only aesthetic; it grounds ethics in lived place. Ethnomusicological work shows how local song forms transmit ecological norms and practical knowledge across generations, as with planting songs in the Rote society that communicate soil care,

seasonal timing, and communal responsibility.¹¹ Similarly, Kiswahili environmental songs function as civic vernaculars that democratize access to conservation discourse by using familiar idiom and

participatory choruses.¹⁴ When audiences hear protest in their own tongue, they recognize themselves as implicated stewards rather than distant spectators.

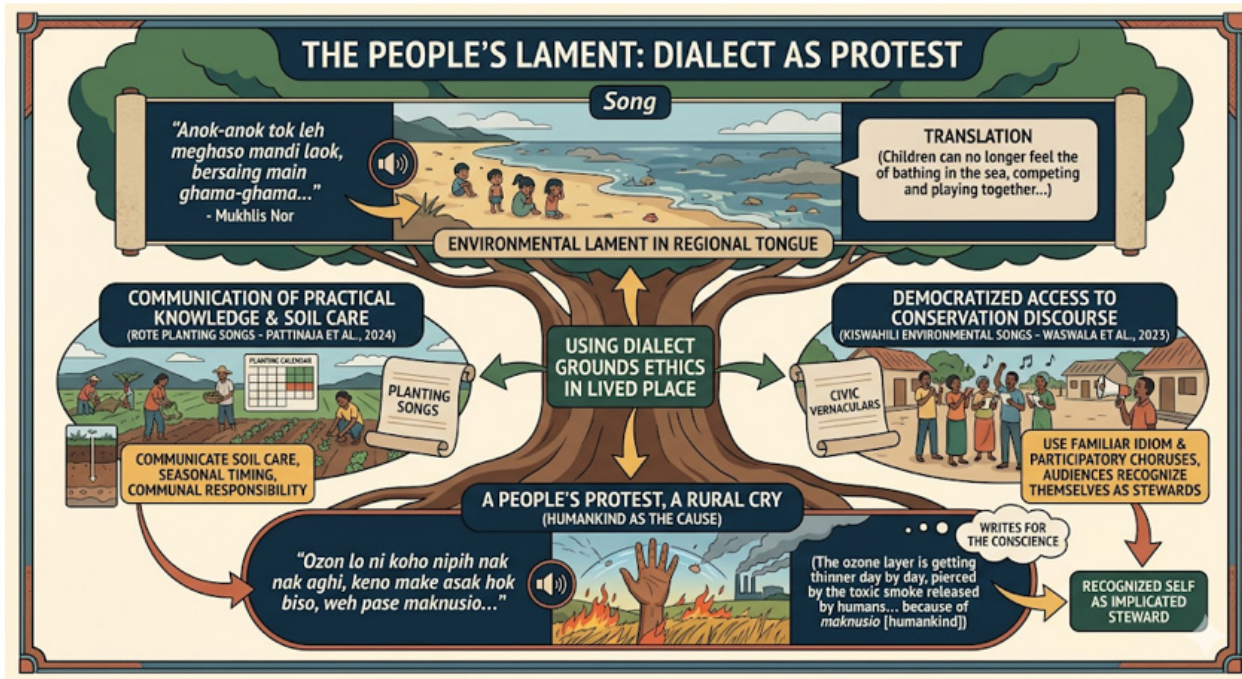


Figure 3 Conceptual Illustration of How Regional Dialect Functions as a Medium for Environmental Expression, Cultural Identity, and Eco-Ethical Communication in Hijau. Note: This figure presents a conceptual interpretation of the role of Kelantanese dialect in communicating environmental concerns, cultural memory, and local ecological values within the song Hijau. The visual elements are synthesized from the song lyrics and relevant literature on ethnomusicology, environmental communication, and cultural sustainability, including.^{11,14} The figure is intended to illustrate theoretical relationships and educational concepts discussed in the text and does not represent original empirical data. The diagram was generated using Google Gemini and subsequently reviewed and revised by the author.

The use of Kelantanese dialect carries particular significance within Malaysian environmental discourse because it is deeply connected to kampung identity, local memory, and everyday interactions with the natural environment. Unlike Standard Malay, which often functions as a national and administrative language, regional dialects embody lived experiences rooted in rivers, forests, agricultural landscapes, and coastal communities. Consequently, environmental loss expressed through dialect resonates not merely as an ecological concern but also as a cultural and emotional disruption. The disappearance of clean rivers, healthy coastlines, and traditional livelihoods therefore becomes inseparable from the erosion of local identity itself.

When the soul of the song screams: modern decay

Figure 4 illustrates the confrontational pivot in MMN’s lyrics, where environmental degradation is explicitly linked to internal human collapse. By naming “illnesses” such as corruption, oppression, and self-obsession alongside pollution and depression, the diagram in Figure 4 shows how the song moves from a lament to an urgent, mantra-like critique of modern society. This strategy of mapping social harms beside ecological ruin serves to highlight a “spiralling world” driven by human hubris. As depicted in Figure 4, this approach mirrors politically conscious genres like thrash metal, which utilize dystopian texts to address corporate malfeasance and militarism, providing a rich foundation for eco-pedagogical critique.³

The secondary section of Figure 4 explores how these lyrical critiques are reinforced through physical settings and logistical practices. Beyond the song itself, the diagram shows that when music festivals in regions like Australia and Aotearoa align their “ethical

text” with “ethical logistics”-such as waste sorting, renewable energy use, and water stations-they create a shared affective terrain.¹ Figure 4 demonstrates that this alignment between messaging and operational sustainability allows audiences to internalize pro-environmental norms more deeply. Ultimately, as shown in Figure 4, the synergy between the “soul of the song” and the setting results in a higher willingness among listeners to adopt sustainable behaviours in their daily lives.

MMN then pivots into something more confrontational: “*Korupsi, oppresi, obsesi diri. Polusi, dipresi, di bumi kini.*” (Corruption, oppression, self-obsession. Pollution and depression plague the Earth today.) He names the illness directly. He links pollution with depression, obsession with destruction, and corruption with ecological ruin. And again, it’s not abstract. It is urgent. Repeated like a mantra, the verse reminds us that the world is spiralling not just because of nature’s wrath, but because of our own inner collapse.

Naming social harms beside ecological harms is a familiar strategy in politically conscious genres. Thrash metal’s dystopian texts map corporate malfeasance, militarism, and environmental collapse onto shared affective terrain, offering classrooms rich case studies for eco-pedagogical critique.³ Outside the studio, festivals translate such critique into practice. Research from Australia and Aotearoa shows that when events align explicit sustainability messaging with visible operations-waste sorting, energy use, water stations-audiences internalize norms and report higher willingness to adopt pro-environmental behaviours beyond the festival gates.¹ Song and setting thus reinforce one another: ethical text meets ethical logistics.

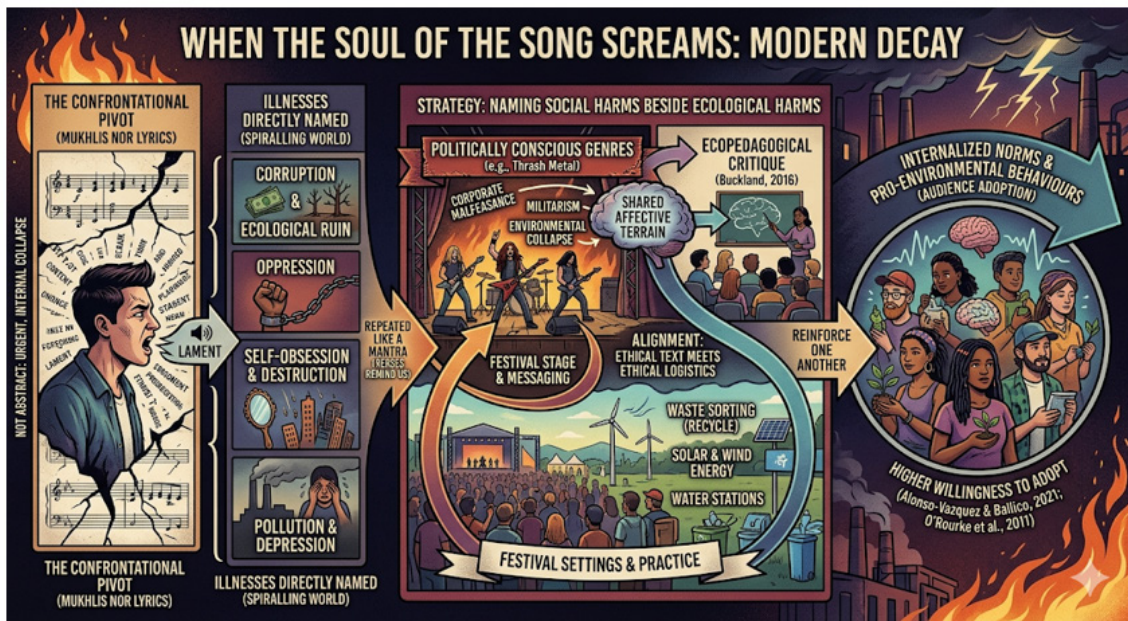


Figure 4 Conceptual Framework Linking Environmental Degradation, Social Challenges, and Sustainability-Oriented Behaviour as Reflected in the Lyrics of Hijau. Note: This figure presents a conceptual synthesis of themes expressed in the song Hijau, illustrating the interconnections between environmental degradation, social and ethical challenges, ecological awareness, and sustainability-oriented behaviour. The framework integrates interpretations of the song lyrics with concepts reported in the literature on eco-pedagogy, environmental communication, music-based sustainability education, and environmentally responsible event practices, including.^{1,3,10} The figure is intended as a visual representation of theoretical and educational concepts discussed in the manuscript and does not constitute original empirical evidence. The diagram was generated using Google Gemini and subsequently reviewed, verified against the cited sources, and revised by the author.

The grief i carry when i listen

Figure 5 illustrates the transition from personal mourning to active environmental stewardship through the experience of “ecological grief.” The process begins with the listener encountering the “sacred testimony” of the song, where lyrics regarding a fading Earth trigger

memories of lost biodiversity, such as the sounds of insects and the shade of vanished trees. As shown in Figure 5, this musical experience acts as a catalyst for metabolizing loss, shifting the listener’s focus from passive sorrow toward a proactive orientation of care.⁴ This transition is vital for moving beyond the feeling that environmental collapse is “natural,” instead recognizing it as a call to responsibility.



Figure 5 Conceptual Pathway Illustrating the Transformation of Ecological Grief into Environmental Awareness, Collective Responsibility, and Stewardship Action Through Music. Note: This figure presents a conceptual interpretation of how the song Hijau may facilitate reflection on environmental loss, ecological

grief, and personal responsibility toward environmental stewardship. The framework synthesizes themes derived from the song lyrics with concepts discussed in the literature on ecological grief, eco-musicality, environmental education, and community engagement, including.^{1,4,9} The figure is intended as a visual representation of theoretical relationships and educational concepts discussed in the manuscript and does not present original empirical data. The diagram was generated using Google Gemini and subsequently reviewed, verified against the cited literature, and revised by the author to ensure conceptual consistency and accuracy.

Figure 5 further details how this grief is “braided with agency” through specific educational and community-based frameworks. In pedagogical settings, “eco-musicality” translates these emotions into hands-on repair projects, such as soundwalks and creating instruments from reclaimed materials, ensuring that mourning leads to tangible service.⁹ Simultaneously, Figure 5 depicts how communal listening at festivals can validate these shared emotions while modelling collective responsibility through ethical logistics like waste sorting and renewable energy use.¹

By bridging the gap between elegy and action, the frameworks in Figure 5 demonstrate how a song serves as an invitation for listeners to move from spectators to implicated stewards.

Every time I listen to Hijau, it feels like I am listening to a sacred testimony. The song reminds me of rivers I once knew, trees I once sat under, and the sound of insects and frogs that now live only in memory. It reminds me that this loss is not natural, it was caused.

And in that sorrow, I hear MMN’s voice, not in singing, but in craftsmanship. The song Hijau is not merely Zainal’s voice. It is MMN’s prophecy. “Bumiku yang kian punah, siapa yang melihat? Dikala kita tersadar, kita terlewat...” (My Earth that is fading away, who is watching? By the time we realize it, it is already too late...). These lines are now painfully true. We woke up too late. And many still sleep.

Scholars describe this affect as ecological grief, where musical form helps listeners metabolize loss while re-orienting attention toward care.⁴ Pedagogies of eco-musicality respond by pairing listening and performance with hands-on repair-instrument-making from reclaimed materials, soundwalks, and service projects-so that grief is braided with agency.⁹ Communal listening at festivals can similarly validate emotion while modelling collective responsibility through the event’s environmental.¹ In this way, Hijau is not only elegy but invitation: to remember, to mourn, and then to act.

Conclusion

Let us say this clearly, because history too often forgets the quiet ones: The melody and lyrics of *Hijau* were created by MMN. He was not just writing a song. He was writing a warning, a prayer, a plea, and an academic worldclass paper in the highest JCR journal. He is not merely a composer. He is the ecological conscience of this nation who chose melody as his megaphone, and lyrics as his protest. *Hijau* is Zainal Abidin’s voice, yes, but it is MMN’s soul. And that soul must not remain hidden in small print.

Why not our students be asked to listen to *Hijau*; not as an assignment, but as a practice of reflection, a moment of truth, a bridge between art and science. Because good things, especially things that carry truth and memory, must be shared and reminded.

Let us play *Hijau* again, not for nostalgia, but for renewal. Let us teach it, credit it, and protect its message. Let us honour MMN where he rightly belongs, in our syllabi, in our national memory, and in our

respect. And above all, before our forests become forgotten verses, and our rivers nothing more than distant memories.

Declaration on the use of artificial intelligence

The author declares that generative artificial intelligence tools were used in a supportive capacity during the preparation of this manuscript. These tools assisted with language refinement, structural organisation, and stylistic clarity of the text. All ideas, interpretations, reflections, and conclusions presented in this paper are the author’s own and are grounded in personal experience and scholarly judgment. The author retains full responsibility for the content, accuracy, originality, and integrity of the manuscript.

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None.

Conflicts of interest

The author declare that there are not conflict of interest.

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