

THE CONCEPT OF PUNISHMENT IN ISLAM AND
BUDDHISM: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS ON *NĀR*
AND *NARAKA*

BY

QUTUB SHAH

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ABSTRACT

This study attempts to examine the concept of punishment for human misdeeds in the retribution system of Islam and Buddhism with special focus on the major punishment known as the *Nār* and *Naraka*. The goal of this research is to compare the two ideas by drawing a parallel between the respective systems in order to identify the aspects of similarity and dissimilarity. The importance lies in filling a distinct gap in the field of comparative religion on a topic related to salvation holding the greatest significance in Islam and Buddhism because of their connection to human actions in the lifetime and their fate in the afterlife. This research focuses on the concept, belief, significance, function and nature of the hell, as well as the penal process, ruling authority, pathway to and escapeway from hell in both the religions, adopting descriptive, analytical and comparative methods based on the scriptures and available literature from both religions. The study finds out many contact points in the concept of hell such as current status of physical hell, duration of its life and life of the hellish, its location and function of punishing evildoers physically and spiritually. There is also certain level of agreement in the roots of evil, suffering in the way of hell, some sinful acts leading to and the getaway from it. Besides, there are disagreements such as, in Buddhism, non-theistic karmic authority of *Naraka*, possibility of repeated unidentical rebirth into it and its cosmic essence, whereas Islam enjoys an opposite stand on these issues. These characteristics grant the Buddhists excessive hope likely causing procrastination in devotion unlike Islam trying to create extreme seriousness. However, both religions urge their followers to live a purposeful meritorious life promoting mutual understanding and sphering a wide space to contact each other for multireligious harmony.

خلاصة البحث

هذه الدراسة تحاول فحص مفهوم العقاب على أعمال الإنسان السيئة في نظام الجزاء في الإسلام والبوذية مع التركيز بشكل خاص على العقاب النهائي المعروف باسم النار والناراك. الهدف من هذا البحث هو مقارنة الفكرتين عن طريق رسم موازٍ بين النظامين من أجل تحديد جوانب الائتلاف والاختلاف. تكمن أهميته في سد فجوة واضحة في مجال مقارنة الأديان في موضوع يتعلق بالنجاة التي تحمل الأهمية الكبرى في الإسلام والبوذية بسبب ارتباطهما بأعمال الإنسان في الدنيا ومصيرها في الآخرة. يركز هذا البحث على مفهوم الجحيم وعقيدته وأهميته ووظيفته وطبيعته، بالإضافة إلى العملية العقابية والسلطة الحاكمة والطريق إلى الجحيم والمفر منه في الديانتين، متبنية المناهج الوصفية والتحليلية والمقارنة ومعتمدة على الكتب المقدسة والأدب المتاح من كلا الديانتين. فخرجت الدراسة بعدد من نقاط الاتصال في مفهوم الجحيم مثل الوضع الحالي للجحيم المادي، ومدة بقائها والحياة فيها، وموقعها ووظيفتها لمعاقبة العصاة جسدياً وروحياً، كما أن هناك مستوى معين من الاتفاق في جذور الشر والمعاناة في طريق الجحيم وبعض الآثام التي تؤدي إليها والمفر منها. إلى جانب ذلك، هناك خلافات مثل السلطة الكارمية الغير الإلهية للجحيم وماهية الجحيم الكوني، وإمكانية تكرار إعادة الولادة الغير المتشابهة عند البوذية، بينما يتمتع الإسلام بموقف مخالف في هذه القضايا. وهذه خصائص تتمحور حول الأمل المفرط الذي ربما يسبب التسوية في التدين بخلاف الإسلام الذي يحاول إنشاء جدية متشددة. ومع ذلك، تحت الديانتان أتباعهما على عيش حياة صالحة هادفة وهما تعززان التفاهم المتبادل وتوفران مساحة واسعة لاتصال بعضهم ببعض من أجل الانسجام بين الأديان.

APPROVAL PAGE

The thesis of Qutub Shah has been approved by the following:

Amilah Bt. Awang Abd. Rahman @ Jusoh
Supervisor

Noor Amali Bin Mohd. Daud
Co-Supervisor

Fatmir Shehu
Internal Examiner

Khadijah Binti Mohd Khambali @ Hambali
External Examiner

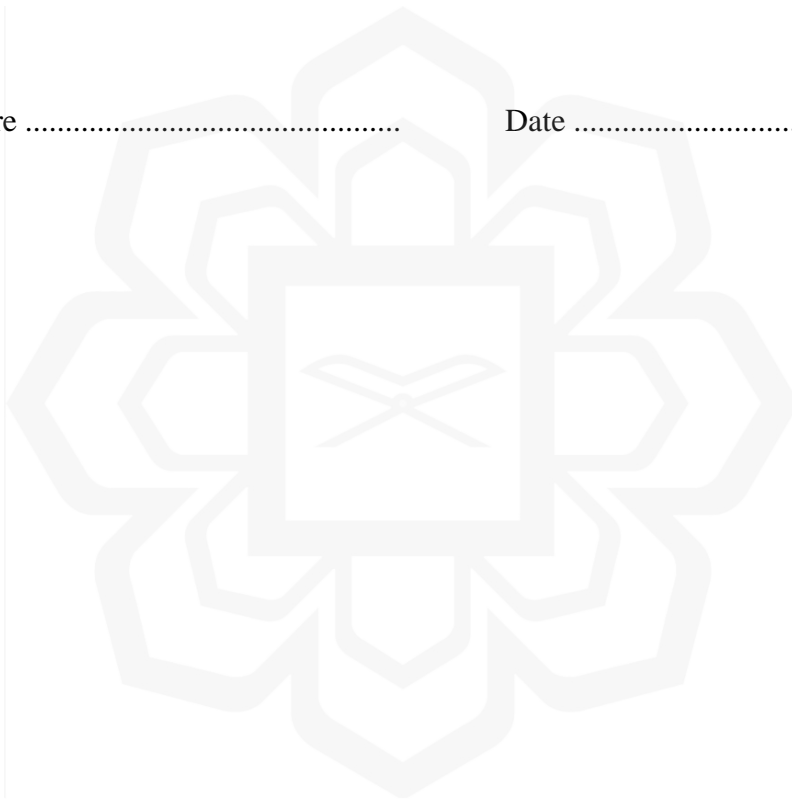
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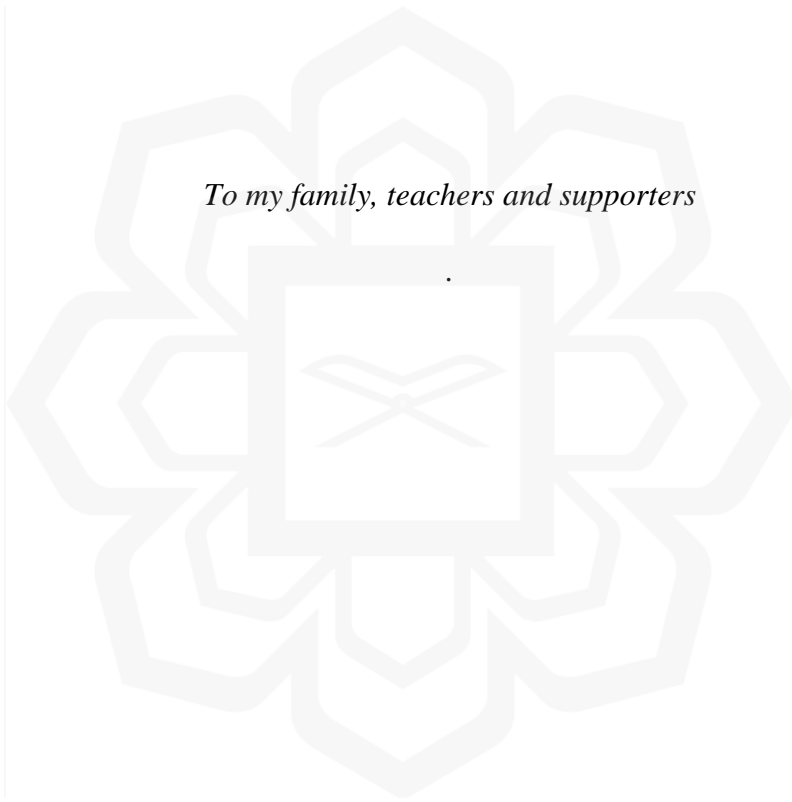
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To my family, teachers and supporters



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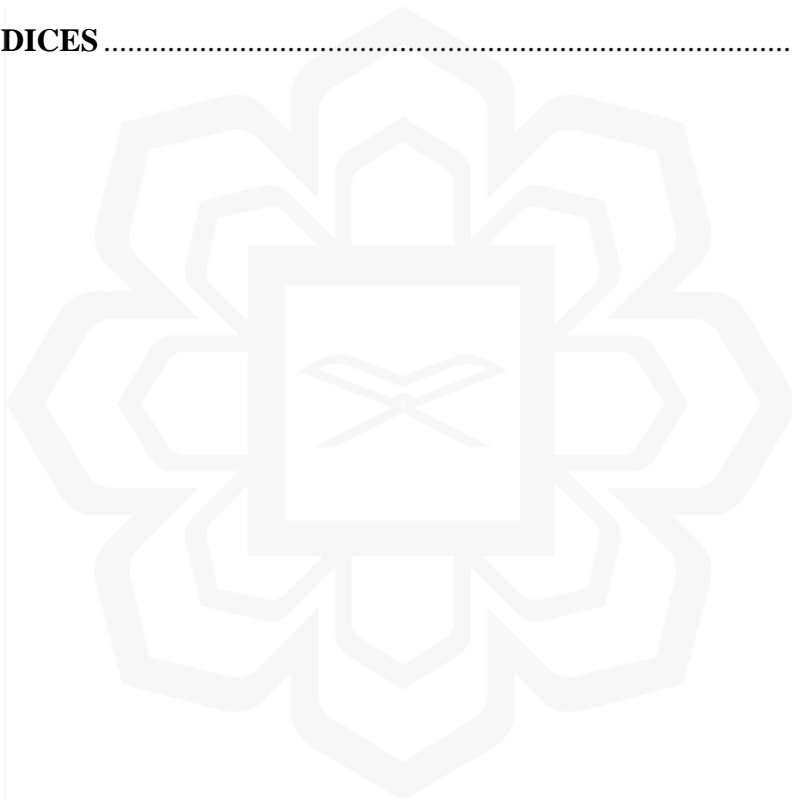
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TRANSLITERATION TABLE

أ	د	خ	kh	ش	sh	غ	gh	ن	n
ب	b	د	d	ص	ṣ	ف	f	هـ	h
ت	t	ذ	dh	ض	ḍ	ق	q	و	w
ث	th	ر	r	ط	ṭ	ك	k	ي	y
ج	j	ز	z	ظ	ẓ	ل	l		
ح	ḥ	س	s	ع	‘	م	m		

Short vowels

اَ

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i

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u

Long vowels

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ā

اِ + ِ

ī

اُ + ُ

ū

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND

Praises be to Allah (S.W.T.). We praise him and seek His help and forgiveness. We seek refuge with Allah (S.W.T.) from the evil of our souls and our bad deeds. Whomsoever Allah (S.W.T.) guides will never be led astray, and whomsoever Allah (S.W.T.) leaves astray, no one can guide. I bear witness that there is no god but Allah (S.W.T.), and I bear witness that Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) is His slave and Messenger.

The divine instruction to mankind in the Qur'ānic verse:

Say, "O People of the Book, come to common terms as between us and you..." (Qur'ān, *Āl 'Imrān*: 64)¹

As well as the prophetic guidance to Mu'ādh when sent as a representative of Islam to Yemen:

*"Verily, you are coming to a people among the people of the Book."*²

Gives the legitimacy to study beliefs and faiths of others before entering into dialogue with them. Scholars such as al-Jāhiz, al-Shahristāni, Ibn al-Qayyim, al-Andalūsi, and so forth introduced approaches to the study of other religions.

Almost every religion is a system of reward for good deeds and punishment for misdeeds with differences in the concept of retribution. Reward and punishment are major themes of religions. Through this system of reward and punishment, every religion tries to reform its followers, individuals, and societies. All religions offer glad

¹ For the translation of the Quranic verses, translation of Abdullah Yusuf Ali is referred to sourcing from www.quran.com.

² Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, ed. Muhammad Fu'ād 'Abd al-Bāqī (Bayrūt: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, n.d.), vol. 1, 50 (No. 19, Classified as *Ṣaḥīḥ*).

tidings for those who perform good and warns of the severe consequences of its rejection and engaging in evil. In Islam, the Holy *Qur'ān* states:

So, whoever does an atom's weight of good will see it, and whoever does an atom's weight of evil will see it. (al-Zalzalah: 7-8)

At the same time, Buddhism states:

According to the seed that's sown, so is the fruit you reap therefrom, Doer of good will gather good, Doer of evil, evil reaps, Down is the seed and thou shalt taste the fruit thereof.³

In terms of good and bad in human behaviour, both Islam and Buddhism recognise the existence of evil beside the good and drew a line between the two. They have assigned consequences for one who oversteps the boundaries and commits wrong in the form of 'punishment'. However, the definition of what constitutes evil differs between religions. This punishment includes the major punishment in the next life, which is called *Nār* (Fire or Hell) by Islam and *Naraka* (Hell) by Buddhism, and the minor punishment in this life according to the criminal justice systems in every religion.

This penal system is the major tool to reform the behaviour of criminals and sinners. Reforming one's actions depends on the influence of the penal system in terms of positivity and negativity; lightness and strength; and its seriousness and frivolity. However, the effectiveness of these systems differs.

1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Every religion has a retribution system though its concept varies from one religion to another. Every action has a reaction, or for every deed is a result. This dynamic can be termed reward and punishment or cause and effect. It is a central theme in every religion that attempts to correct the behavior of its followers by the promise of reward for good

³ Tripitaka, Samutta Nikaya: 11.10

and warning of punishment for bad actions. Human being is the centre of all religion including Islam and Buddhism and it is his actions that is put under surveillance and put the interest of the two religions in mainly.

Islam means total submission to the Will of Allah (S.W.T.) and man must act in obedience to His commands and rules laid down by Him. While being under His control, the man has ability for action and to choose good and bad of it. Islam forbids crime and sin, has appointed punishment in this life or the hereafter for the perpetrators, and emphasised the importance of equity and justice in this world or reckoning in the hereafter that will result in one's landing in heaven or hell called *Jannah* and *Jahannam* (Nār).

As He declared rewards for obedience and decreed punishments for disobedience, which may amount to hellish sentence. How one's disobedience and responsibility will be decided while being under divine control? On which basis Allah (S.W.T.) has stated the right and the wrong? How will be the accountability? What are the sorts of punishment, when and how do the punishment will be executed? What is the Nar all about and ow do the sinners will be dealt here in this world?

Buddhism also recognises that no bad is devoid of a bad result in this life or the next, which ranges from the tiniest undesired circumstance to the hellish rebirth. While Buddhism doesn't believe in the Divine, who gives guidance and guidelines on good and bad, and what are the measures of good and bad in the absence of god or his vicegerent; what is the punishment and how does it come; how is it executed; how the evildoers are treated in the social context?

In general, questions arise here as to what is the concept of evilness, sin, crime, and justice; what are their measures; does it recognise the criminal justice system? How does it deal with crime and criminals in this world? The function of the penal system is

to deter the potential offender, to rebuke the culprit, to help the oppressed and to warn others. Its influence on individuals and society derives from the effectiveness of this system, its seriousness or frivolity. The question here is: to what extent is it effective and does it carry out its goals?

Islam teaches that the end destination for sinners meriting major punishment is *Nār*. Buddhism also accepts the idea of major punishment and a destination of torment for sinners called *Naraka*. The resemblance between the two ideas in their names and functions raises the question: to what extent are they similar and different from each other? The proposed study is an attempt to discuss, analyse and answer these questions in the context of comparison to identify similarities and differences between the two religions regarding misdeeds and its result in the system of retribution.

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study seeks answers to the following questions:

1. What is the concept of punishment on human evil action or sin in Islam and Buddhism?
2. What is the major punishment and the concept of *Nār* in Islam?
3. What is the major punishment and the concept of *Naraka* in Buddhism?
4. What are the similarities and differences between the concept of *Nār* in Islam and the concept of *Naraka* in Buddhism related especially to the major punishment?

1.4 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objective of the study is to understand the similarities and differences between the major punishments in Islam and Buddhism. It is hoped that will be achieved by pursuing the following objectives:

1. Understanding the concept of punishment in Islam and Buddhism.
2. Exploring the concepts of *Nār* in Islam.
3. Exploring the concepts of *Naraka* in Buddhism.
4. Conducting a comparative analysis between the two concepts to identify similarities and differences.

1.5 SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This research focuses on the study of punishment in the retribution systems in Islam and Buddhism including how they deal with crime and criminals in this life and the major punishment in the next life.

It will enter into a detailed study about *Naraka* in Buddhism and *Nār* in Islam as mentioned in their respective scriptures and the attributes of its nature, torments, and inhabitants, without engaging in philosophical interpretations of their essence. The discussion will also follow the mainstream of the two religions and avoid anomalous opinions. The study will attempt to identify similarities and differences regarding the concept, effectiveness, and attributes of the justice systems in Islam and Buddhism.

1.6 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The significance of the study lies in the fact that this study discusses the issue of retribution for the human actions which is related to the human behaviours and its results in the lifetime and their fate in the afterlife. The retribution system only guarantees the

societies' happiness while the individuals are the primary cells of society. Righteousness or corruption of a society is based on righteousness or corruption of its members.

As it is a comparative study of two core beliefs in two different religions, it will help nurture mutual understanding between followers of both faiths, in addition to the understanding of teachings of own religion. That is what mutual respect and coexistence are based on in a multi-religious society. Also, Islamic libraries are still in need of comparative studies in the field of comparative religions, especially between Abrahamic Islam and Eastern Buddhism. This study will take part in fulfilling this need.

The study also derives significance from being a tool for advocates of inter-religious dialogues, peacemakers, students and researchers of comparative religions, and so forth as there is no previous study on the topic. Finally, this kind of study brings out the beauties of religion for the happiness of the mankind, which is very important for helping man reach the abode of peace in the next life.

1.7 METHODOLOGY OF THE RESEARCH

This is qualitative research. It will involve library research only. As a comparative study, descriptive, analytical and comparative methodologies are used based on scriptures i.e., *Tripitāka*, *al-Qur'ān* and the authentic sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.), and available literature.

1.7.1 Descriptive Approach

This approach is adopted in describing the ways that Islam and Buddhism deal with crimes and criminals in this world and the hereafter based on the concept of punishment in light of the concept of *Naraka* and *Nār*. The questions will be presented based on

mainstream beliefs without criticising, refutation and inclination to a particular sect, through the scriptures and available literature.

1.7.2 Analytical Approach

This approach will be used to analyse the sacred texts and related commentaries or secondary sources to understand the question of punishment in the two religions and what is mentioned concerning hell in their respective scriptures and secondary sources. Through this approach, it will be attempted to find out the main features and characteristics of punishment of the evildoers in this world and afterword and that of the respective hells and related issues such as beliefs, times, places, natures, reasons, types, ways, tools, implementations, ruling authority, deserving beings and fates.

1.7.3 Comparative Approach

Following the description of the punishment and its ultimate abode in Islam and Buddhism, and analysis their main features, with this approach, the parallels between both the Islamic and Buddhist concepts of punishment and that of the hell will be drawn in order to identify the aspects of similarity and dissimilarity between the two penal systems.

1.8 LITERATURE REVIEW

Many books have been written on Islam and Buddhism, especially on reward and punishment in each of the religions without comparing between the topic of punishment. The topic of this researcher has not been discussed in any meaningful way in previous works.

Jens Braarvig's "*The Buddhist Hell: An Early Instance of the Idea?*"⁴ is a work presenting the early instance of the buddhis hell, which is quite opposite to the modern idea that Buddhism is too rational a religion to have a conception of hell or the idea of posing the possibility of hell only existing in the mind instead of in a physical location also that opens up possibilities of interpreting the entire concept of hell as metaphorical. Jens resorted to Kathāvatthu, Vināya, Jātakas and Abhidhamma to study the topic. It is discussed that the idea of hell as a realm one is reborn and punished for evil actions according to the law of kamma, and it is not eternal, yet may last for enormous time span until sins are atoned. The current study is an attempt to compare this to Islamic hell.

"*Dilālat al-Makān fī Ṣuwar al-Jannah wa al-Nār fī al-Qur'ān*" (Connotation of Place in Images of the Paradise and Hell in Quran)⁵ is an article by Ammar Abdul Amir al-Salami. It is one of the important researches related to Heaven and Hell in Islam, which deals with the connotation of place in images and scenes of the two abodes in the next life as mentioned in the Quran. He demonstrated necessity of place in those images and implication of space in concept of Heaven and Hell, where the latter is the main concern of the underlying research. It is deduced that place being the space occupied by the material is a key part there. Accordingly, the physicality of the hell is proven. This work helps understand an important aspect of the nature of the Islamic hell. In the current study this idea will be drawn parallel to that of the Buddhist hell.

⁴ Jens Braarvig, "The Buddhist Hell: An Early Instance of the Idea?" *Numen* 56, no. 2/3 (2009): 254–81. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/27793792. Accessed Mar 2, 2020.

⁵ Ammar Abdul Amir al-Salami, "Dilālah al-Makān fī Ṣuwar al-Jannah wa al-Nār fī al-Qur'ān" *Majallah Kulliyyah al-Tarbiyah li al-Banāt li al-'Ulūm al-Insāniyyah*, Vol. 10, no. 19 (2016): 217-242.

“*Punishment from Islamic Perspectives*”⁶ is a journal article by Shazia Ramzan, Naseem Akhter and Ainee Rubab dealing with the theory of punishment in Islam compared to the Western perspectives. In Islam there are some sins that are punished upon in this world and the Creator prescribed a panel system for human society to deal with criminals and hold them accountable and punish, in addition to final divine judgement. To understand the mundane punishment in Islam this source is referred to in this research.

“*Maḥmūm Jazā’ al-A‘amāl ‘inda al-Būdhīyyati wa al-Islām: Dirāsah Muqāranah bayna al-Nirvāna wa al-Jannah*”⁷ (The Concept of Retribution of Human Deeds in Buddhism and Islam: A Comparative Study Between *Nirvana* and *Jannah*) is a Master’s dissertation written by Qutub Shah. In this work, the researcher discussed the retribution system of human deeds in Buddhism and Islam and detailed how good deeds and bad deeds are rewarded or punished in both. It is a good source to understand the mechanism of retribution for human deeds. It gives the idea that in Islam Allah created the men, commanded him to morally and holds them accountable for their actions. In contrast, the Buddhism substituted Karma for these divine roles. Paradise and hell are believed to be two opposite destinations of welldoers and evildoers in both. He specifically studied the ultimate reward of good deeds i.e., *Nirvana* and *Jannah* of Buddhism and Islam respectively. After examining the characteristics of each, he compared between the two ideas and identified the similarities and differences. He pointed to the lack of studies on the punishment of human misdeeds in a comparative context. Hence, the proposed research is an attempt to fill this lacuna in the literature.

⁶ Shazia Ramzan, Naseem Akhter and Ainee Rubab, “Punishment from Islamic Perspectives” *FWU Journal of Social Sciences*, Vol. 9, No.1 (Summer 2015): 53-56.

⁷ Qutub Shah, *Maḥmūm Jazā’ al-A‘amāl ‘ind al-Būdhīyyah wa al-Islām: Dirāsah Muqāranah bayna al-Nirvāna wa al-Jannah*, (Master’s Thesis, International Islamic University Malaysia, 2015).