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## Character Development of Flood Victims through Understanding the Concept of *Ibtıla'* (Trials) To Overcome Flood Trauma: Case Studies in Temerloh, Pahang

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### Abstract

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Trauma is an emotional response resulting from horrifying experience. Natural disasters are one of the events that can trigger trauma. In Malaysia, flood is considered as such natural disaster. The year 2014 has witnessed one of the worst floods in national history. The catastrophic flood does not only cause material losses, but also affect victims' psyche. In Islam, the occurrence of disasters can be viewed as God plans and trials (*ibtıla'*) for humankind. In theory, belief in *ibtıla'* strengthens human emotion in facing dreadful incidents. Based on this view, a study is carried out to discover the relationship between the understanding in the concept of *ibtıla'* with the development of good character to overcome the flood trauma among the victims. A structured interview has been carried out to two case study subjects in Temerloh, Pahang whom have faced huge losses in the great flood of 2014. This study finds that there is a relationship between understanding *ibtıla'* and developing good character. This then may be employed managing trauma and nurture social virtues such as teamwork, tolerance and helping others.

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**Keywords:** Trauma; flood; *ibtıla'* (trials); Islam; good character.

## 1. Introduction

According to the National Security Council (2012), a natural disaster is defined as one incident that cause disruption to social activity and state affairs, involves casualties, material and economic losses and environmental destruction that is beyond the capacity of the public to resolve and require an extensive allocation of resources.

In Malaysia one of the incidents that are considered as natural disaster and a frequent occasion is flood. However, the year 2014 had witnessed flood that caused huge impact as compared to the previous years, especially in the number of victims and the incurred losses. The flood had even been known to be the worst in national history when it involved 225,731 people in the year alone (Ahmad, 2014). In fact, Mstar (2015) reported various government agencies had estimated that the losses and destructions caused by the Great Flood of 2014 to be closed to RM 1 billion.

Based on the definition of disaster as mentioned above, flood which is considered as natural disaster has caused numerous damages, losses and costs that can affect victims especially on their mental and emotional aspects. This psychological effect according to the American Psychological Association (2015) and SAMHSA (2014) is known as trauma; an emotional response when one experienced a negative incident. Although trauma is a normal response to an unbearable event, the consequences can be detrimental and could influence the capability of the victim to lead a normal life, especially for those who have been affected by natural disasters.

This study will explore the religious understanding aspect, specifically on the concept of *ibtıla'* (trials) in overcoming flood trauma and its role to the development of one's good characters. The discussion will be divided into several sections as follows.

## 2. Problem Statements

According to the American Psychological Association (2015), natural disaster victims will generally face and experience some reactions and responses that can be identified based on these factors: i) The appearance of an unpredictable emotion such as panic; ii) Changes in thoughts and behaviour for example by often recalling the disaster incident and being disturbed by it; iii) Sensitive towards surrounding factors such as the sound of a siren and other factors that may stimulate their memory to recall the incident; iv) Relationship with others may be affected such as elevated conflict with other individuals and family members or unusually withdraw from social activities; and v) Physical symptoms that are related to depression such as headache, queasiness and chest pains.

The symptoms above obviously disrupt everyday life and may change the personality and character of the victims. Therefore, as mentioned by American Psychological Association (2015) and SAMHSA (2014), many methods had been proposed by the experts in the field of psychology and psychotherapy to overcome trauma and emotional distress, such as by gaining support and sympathy from the people around them, recounting the experience faced by family members and friends, leading a healthy lifestyle, joining a professionally organized support groups and so on.

Several solutions on trauma problems that were suggested above were more focused on the external aspects, perceived to support victims' emotions and feelings. Psychological and medical approach as

explained above considering that human behaviour was determined by law or an external response. However, do human have the potential to overcome trauma and disruptions internally without any support or any other environmental factors mentioned above? Some of the symptoms suffered by victims showed the existence of a relationship between soul and body. It was proven by Bhamani (2012) and Meichenbaum's (n.d.) finding that the depression in the psyche also affects the physical aspect. Thus, the solution on depression and trauma should not only involve physical aspect and external factors, but more importantly should prioritize the internal aspect which is the spiritual development of the victims.

The development of spiritual and character of the victims were also related to self-administered treatment (psychotherapy or auto therapy) that was usually linked to faith or religion as examined by Muhsin & Saari (2015) and Jalaluddin (2005). In this context, there was a relationship between faith and spiritual development that can be seen in the manifestation of submission and surrender to the powers of God. It may create an optimistic behaviour as affirmed by Hamat & Nordin (2012) that leads to other positive attributes such as peace, tranquillity and feeling loved. Life was considered to be more meaningful especially when human faced incidents that are beyond their control.

Therefore, in the aspect of character building, religion has a role to rehabilitate the victims affected by the disaster especially on their thoughts and behaviour. According to the Islamic teaching, matters regarding all that happen in one's life including natural disasters were related to their belief in *Qada'* (fate) and *Qadar* (destiny). By having this faith, Sayyid Sabiq (2003) assured that they believed God had arranged everything in this world, and everything happened in accordance to God's plans. Therefore, Muslims who believe in fate will convince that all things happen in this world is based on the wisdom of God as affirmed by Sayyid Sabiq (2003) as well as Hamat & Nordin (2012). These incidents that cause difficulties for men were included in God's plan and men had to undergo them. It is called as *ibtila'*; an important element in the question of fate. *Ibtila'* or *bala'* can be defined as something that was given to someone to test him. It comes in the form of difficulties, pains and sufferings as indicated in the dictionary of *al-Mu'jam al-Wasit* (2005). However, in Islam, *ibtila'* can be perceived from two different viewpoints, firstly, it occurred as a result of the destructions caused by men, and secondly, whatever occurred was actually a trial from God. According to Hamat & Nordin (2012), the former is a disaster or a catastrophe occurred had to be endured by men, as it is a direct results of their actions, whereas the latter could happened to anyone chosen by God as a trial to them.

In theory, having the faith described above can heal trauma or depression that may befall to the victims who were facing *ibtila'*. In helpless situations, Muslims who faced *ibtila'* will work hard to realize that whatever happened was a course of trials that had to be endured. They realized that all their possession ultimately belongs to God that they were in fact borrowing from God; who absolutely the Owner of the properties, families and even themselves. The internal malaises that exist within as proposed by Muhsin & Saari (2015) could be healed when victims pondered on the divine wisdoms from the incident. They then, should try hard to observe positive values from the incident, whether it was for a fact, God's retribution or trials. If it was seen as retribution, men would see it as a punishment for the wrongdoings, and that they must repent for it and would not repeat it. Otherwise, if it was seen as God's trials, they would accept it with patience and perseverance. Their feelings were

calmed by the belief that whatever had been experienced had been ordained by God, thus the faith would avoid depression from occurring.

Hence, religious faith could change the perspective on *ibtıla'*; from viewing it as suffering, to positive values to the extent that prejudice and other negative characters be seen as something positive. Therefore, according to Jalaluddin (2005) the negative effects of *ibtıla'* could be neutralized, in fact it could be viewed positively to the extent that with the trials, men were more optimistic compared to prior to the incident.

The above explanation has conceptually shown how the understanding of *ibtıla'* concept play its role to the development of the victims' good characters. However, can it be applied in the real life context? To see the effectiveness of the understanding of *ibtıla'* the authors had carried out a study on the flood victims in Temerloh, Pahang, Malaysia which was one of the most badly affected in the great flood of 2014. Official records (*Mstar*, 2014, *Berita Harian*, 2014) had shown that the district has the most victims in the state of Pahang, which were 19,875 individuals, involving 4831 families that were placed in 62 relief centres.

### **3. Research Methodology**

The study applied qualitative study methods with case study approach (Lebar, 2014) involved two subjects. A case is defined by Stake (1995) as “a bounded system that is “a specific, complex and functioning thing”. The subjects of a case study may be an individual, an organization or else, in order to “understand the context with which it is suited” (Heinz, 2007). As done by Beal & Millenbruch (2015), the case in this study was “drawn from larger study that examined” how the understanding of *ibtıla'* concept effect the character building of 300 flood victims. A semi structured interview guide was used for data collections. Based on this method, data are collected from face to face interaction between researchers and subjects. The main questions were predetermined and formally inquired to ensure that the data obtained were in accordance to the experiences faced by the respondents (Taylor and Bogdan, 1998). Other than taking notes, the interviews were also recorded in audio and then transferred into verbatim transcripts (Taylor and Bogdan, 1998; Lebar, 2014). In data analysis, “the inductive approach of qualitative content analysis was used” as performed by Beal & Millenbruch (2015). Researchers undertook a manual process of reading and checking the data in order to check accuracy of the transcripts and referred to Richie & Lewis's (2003) deductive theoretical framework for coding.

### **4. Respondent Selection**

Subject 1 who was interviewed lives in Kampung Bintang, Temerloh, Pahang. He is 47 years old (as of 2015), works as a blacksmith and has five dependents. He holds Sijil Rendah Pelajaran and attending informal religious study in the local mosque. Meanwhile Subject 2 was from Kampung Ira, Temerloh. He is 42 years old, performing general village works and has five dependents. He only undertook formal education at the secondary level.

The two subjects of study were chosen amongst flood victims that had suffered huge property losses and damages as recorded and suggested by the Village Chiefs in Temerloh, Pahang, Malaysia as well as their income compared to other villagers. Both subjects did not have steady income and had done many types of works to support themselves and their families. In terms of damages, both Subjects estimated that they had lost around RM10,000 or more when their house was submerged, causing appliances and utensils to be washed away. No casualties and injuries recorded for both families during the flood.



**Fig. 1.** Picture of the subject's house during and after the flood.

## 5. Question Format

The questions had been divided into four sections concerning firstly subjects demographic data; secondly at what extends the subjects understanding on the concept of *ibtıla'* by examining at their views on fate and destiny, *ibtıla'* as tribulations and their comprehension on the existence of divine wisdom behind every tribulation; thirdly section, evaluation on subjects acceptance level on *ibtıla'* that comprised statements about subjects feelings when facing tribulations and characters that were developed as a result of the tribulations. Finally, fourth section was to evaluate the relationship between the understanding of the concept of *ibtıla'* with subjects character development. The questions prepared were geared towards the issue of the disaster consequences on victims; upon physical, cognitive, emotional, behavioural and social aspects along with subjects' conditions upon his religious knowledge, family life, social relations and spiritual development.

## 6. Results

The results of this study were presented based on the three sections as mentioned above, as follows.

### 6.1 Understanding the concept of *ibtıla'*

The interviews indicated that both subjects did not have a precise understanding of the concept of *ibtıla'*. However both agreed and knew some of the elements in the concept, such as, that the disaster is a fated incident and a divine trial and realization that there was a divine wisdom and lesson within. Both subjects understood terms such as *qada'* and *qadar* and trials through their views that disaster is God's provision which is absolute in nature. They acknowledge that life in this world itself is a trial of pleasures and sufferings, thus it is a place to offer good deeds.

### 6.2 Acceptance towards *ibtila'*

As had been described, even though both subjects had never heard of the term *ibtila'*, they generally understand the *qada'*, *qadar* and God's trials aspects. This knowledge was obtained from the lessons learnt in secondary school and informal studies at the local mosque. Both subjects acknowledged that the flood that had occurred in the year 2014 as the worst flood that they had experienced especially when related it to the losses and the effects of the disaster on their homes. In fact, both of them agreed that it was the hardest trial that they had experienced throughout their life. Subject 1 for example look at the incident as giving a deeper impact to him as compared to the time when he lost his mother as he said "*Paling besar ujian, kematian mak tu tak terasa, tak terasa letih macam tu. Cuma kita ni hiba je lah, ini..hu ya ALLAH tinggi selut nya ah*" (The biggest tribulation, the death of mom was not so terrible, did not feel tired like that. Only we were sad, but this.. hu oh God the ooze so deep..ah..).

At the emotional level, both respondents were sad and were at the verge of tears when expressing themselves over the catastrophic incident. However, both respondents were seen to be forgiving when they took the stance to be contented to receive what they called as trials for their own self. They also expressed gratitude when the catastrophe did not cause them to suffer casualties or sustain any injuries. The help that they had received in the post-disaster whether in terms of manpower, goods and financial donations were seen as divine blessings that were given by God as a result of their patience in facing the trials of the flood. In the conducted interview, there were no complaints and hopelessness voiced by both subjects. The optimism and positivity could be seen in the subjects when they took the initiative to be involved in rescue missions to help other flood victims and were actively involved in the disaster action committee that was established by the village residents. Subject 2 for example, had the view that the flood disaster was a test that had to be faced collectively. With this in mind, he chose to share the goods donated by contributors with other flood victims.

In terms of the relationship with God, both victims agreed that the recent flood made them closer to God. They also agreed that the feelings of anger and disappointment should not be expressed to God, but instead, prayer and grievances were the things that should be addressed to Him. In short, even though both subjects could not verbally express their understanding on *ibtila'* in theory, they could translate the understanding in their actions, that was accepting whatever that had happened positively.

### 6.3 The relationship between understanding of *ibtila'* with character development

The two subjects acknowledged that the disaster had direct impact onto themselves, but the consequences were more physical, (e.g. weariness) rather than psychological. Disappointments and sadness expressed were also related to external factors such as the unfairness in aid distributions and in the existence of some uncooperative village residents in helping other victims. The symptoms of trauma for example, continuous sadness, guilt, anger and others did not exist. Subject 1 for example only had one cognitive symptom because the incident still haunted his thoughts especially when approaching the end of the year (monsoon season). For Subject 2, as he lived beside the Pahang River, he had seen flood regularly, so for him precautions was what he thought about rather than immersed in

bad feelings and emotions. Therefore, the consequences of trauma for example, aggressiveness, depression, withdrawal, unkemptness and others were not experienced by both subjects. The faith related to *ibtıla'* was seen to create positive characters such as high spirits and inclination to help others as mentioned by Subject 1 “*Kire semangat nak membantu tu jadi lebih tinggi lah, bile kite duduk di tempat yang selamat*” (*The sense of helping others is higher, when we are at a safe place*), and by Subject 2 “*Dari pagi hingga malam dengan hujan ape, tak fikir dah kesihatan sendiri. Janji, bekalan makanan masuk*” (*From morning to night, in the rain, did not think about my own health. The most important thing, [they] get the food supply*).

In terms of religious knowledge, both subjects admitted that they wanted to continue learning about Islam. *Tazkirah* (religious reminders) given to flood victims at relief centres were mentioned to be really needed by them as they reminded them to the trials and fate that God had prepared for them. In terms of family life, the flood had not to disrupt their capability to be responsible to their family. From the interviews with the two subjects, both realized that the responsibility to support their family as the biggest responsibility that they had to bear. In terms of social relationships, both acknowledged that among many divine wisdom behind the disaster is that it strengthened the relationship among the village residents. The collaboration that existed during times of disaster gave them a chance to know each other better.

## 7. Discussion and conclusion

The results above showed the understandings of the *ibtıla'* concept among the subjects may affect the character development of the flood victims. Belief in the fate ordained by God and had faith on divine wisdom behind any incident was seen to play an essential role towards rehabilitation and the development of positive values for both subjects. The feelings and religious awareness as a result of the faith influences the projected emotion, for example the feeling of calm, peace, free from stress and tension, patience, perseverance and contentment.

Both subjects had mentioned that the aid received by them were more in the forms of physical help rather than psychological. Thus, it could be seen that both subjects had opt for self-rehabilitation via their own faith and understanding of religious teaching on fate and destiny to limit the threat of trauma from themselves. The most interesting finding from the study was that the understanding in the concept of *ibtıla'* did not only help in treating flood trauma and creating positive values in the victims, but it also developed good moral values such as considered the disaster as a trial and tribulation to be faced collectively and sympathy towards other victims that they were the ones who provide aid even when they were also facing similar difficulties.

These positive values did not exist if it was not for the understanding and faith in religion. Sympathy and empathy, teamwork and other things could only exist when the victims did not have stress and that they were calm and positive with what they had undergone. Subsequently, the understanding on the concept of *ibtıla'* did not only treat trauma, in fact it could develop other positive outcomes manifested from positive thoughts.

The study concluded the understanding of the concept of *ibtıla'* may affect the character development among flood victims because they believed all tribulations happened in their life were

destined by God the Almighty. Thus, in dealing with flood victims, the authorities should also focus on the psychological and spiritual support along with other assistances like physical aid such as goods and financial support. The psychological and spiritual supports can be in providing religious counsels and motivational talk that emphasize on the aspects of *qada'*, *qadar* and the supremacy of God. Religious studies should be cultivated by utilizing mosque, *surau* and other community centres as a medium to expand religious knowledge as one of the many preparations towards any types of trials that may come in the future.

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