

# PUTERI GUNUNG LEDANG IN POPULAR MEDIA: WOMANHOOD, FEMININITY AND GENDER IN *PUTERI GUNUNG LEDANG* (2004) AND *MAGIKA* (2010)

*(Puteri Gunung Ledang dalam Media Terkenal: Kewanitaan, Sifat Feminin dan Gender dalam Puteri Gunung Ledang (2004) dan Magika (2010))*

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## Abstract

This paper examines two recent films about the legend of Puteri Gunung Ledang in order to analyse what they might tell us about contemporary representations of the mythical figure. In doing so, it will focus on how evolving ideas of womanhood, femininity, and gender portray how Puteri Gunung Ledang is represented in contemporary media. Stories of Puteri Gunung Ledang in 21<sup>st</sup> century films will be studied using a poststructuralist feminist approach, which is guided primarily by Julie Sanders' theory of Adaptation and Appropriation. Puteri Gunung Ledang is one of the most popular tales in Malay culture and is included in *Sulalatus Salatin*, a text that highlights some of the most important historical events during the Malacca Sultanate. Today,

Puteri Gunung Ledang has been rewritten for children and young adult fiction and adapted into other media, such as films and plays. However, the portrayal and characterization of the titular character have evolved, not just in printed versions of the story but also in other popular cultural forms, such as film.

Keywords: Puteri Gunung Ledang, folktales, Malay culture, gender, film, popular culture

### **Abstrak**

*Kertas kerja ini mengkaji dua buah filem terbaharu tentang legenda Puteri Gunung Ledang untuk menganalisis penceritaannya tentang representasi kontemporari tokoh mitos itu. Dengan itu, kajian ini memberikan tumpuan terhadap perkembangan idea kewanitaan, sifat feminin dan gender yang melambangkan Puteri Gunung Ledang dalam media kontemporari. Kisah Puteri Gunung Ledang dalam filem abad ke-21 telah dikaji menggunakan pendekatan feminis pascastrukturalis terutamanya berpandukan teori Adaptasi dan Pemakaian oleh Julie Sanders. Puteri Gunung Ledang ialah salah satu cerita yang paling popular dalam budaya Melayu dan termasuk dalam kisah Sulalatus Salatin, sebuah teks yang mengetengahkan beberapa peristiwa sejarah terpenting semasa Kesultanan Melaka. Hari ini, Puteri Gunung Ledang telah ditulis semula untuk fiksiyen kanak-kanak dan remaja dan diadaptasi dalam media lain seperti filem dan drama. Walau bagaimanapun, penggambaran dan perwatakan tersebut telah berkembang, bukan sahaja dalam versi bercetak, tetapi juga dalam bentuk budaya popular lain seperti filem.*

*Kata kunci: Puteri Gunung Ledang, cerita rakyat, budaya Melayu, gender, filem, budaya popular*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Bascom (1965) contends that folklore is often associated with folktales, myths, and legends that occasionally feature non-human characters, such as deities, elves, witches, and fairies (p. 4–5). He further explains the specific features that differentiate the three narrative forms—folktales, myths, and legends—as folktales are fictional, myths are sacred fiction, and legends are facts. Although Bascom recognizes folktales, myths, and legends as three narrative forms, Malinowski, one of the pioneers of the functionalism

approach, uses the term “fairy tales” rather than “folktales” as part of the fictional narrative forms of folklore (Bascom, 1954:335). However, Bascom (1954) disagrees as he believes that fairy narratives are factual (p. 335). In the context of this study, we refer to tales as *cerita-cerita rakyat* or “folktales” rather than “fairy tale” or *cerita pari-pari* because, unlike European tales, Malaysian tales rarely feature fairies.

Austronesian societies tolerated female monarchy, which Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic societies opposed (Reid, 1988:639). Despite being an Islamic state, Aceh was ruled by four queens for 59 years after Iskandar Sani passed. The first queen of Aceh, Safiyyat ad-Din, ascended the throne when the aristocracy recognized her qualities as a ruler (Ozay, 2011:144). Aceh was known as Serambi Mekah due to Safiyyat ad-Din’s efforts to prioritize Islamic law and practices among her people (Ozay, 2011:148). Reid (1988) listed several other female rulers in pre-colonial Southeast Asia who imposed great rulings, such as Burma’s Shinsaw-bu and Japara’s Kali-nyamat (p. 640). Cheah (1993) mentioned a few female monarchs who have contributed to their region’s growth, such as Patani’s Sultanahs, Bantam’s Ratu Syarifah Fatimah, and Perlis’ Wan Fatimah, apart from the infamous Safiyyat ad-Din. Female monarchy in Aceh eventually fell due to a decline in the number of credible noblewomen and supporters among the nobles (Reid, 1988:642). As the last queen, Kamalat Syah was unable to keep the throne against the impending Meccan delegates who despised female rule (Khan, 2017:277).

Therefore, an analysis of the Malay folktale adaptation films is necessary as the two studied films also impose the reconstruction of the strong female protagonist concept. An approach towards modernizing folktales that many filmmakers manoeuvred presents another perspective of interpreting the cultural heritage. Hence, this study serves to be instrumental in supplying the authors’ foundation on Puteri Gunung Ledang’s narrative before facilitating the market’s demands for alternative folktale narratives. Besides, a study on Malaysian oral-turned-written folktales is pertinent to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)’s objective of conserving intangible cultural heritage (ICH). The study leans toward UNESCO’s goal of achieving quality education by 2030, which incorporates Malaysian folktales in the curriculum to ensure students’ familiarity with the genre. The study strives to significantly reduce gaps in academia, specifically in the Malaysian classic literature genre, and produce innovative ideas and deeper understandings to develop the related fields for future research.

## **MALAYSIAN FOLK STORIES AND LEGENDS: PUTERI GUNUNG LEDANG**

Malaysian folktales can be categorized into diverse genres, such as animal tales or fables like humour tales, romance tales, and exemplary tales (Wan Fatimah et al., 2018:2). These are by no means all the genres available but represent several of an exhaustive list. Some tales have evolved to incorporate Islamic values—such as *tawadhu* (humility), *tawakal* (reliance on God), *syukur* (grateful), *taat* (obedience), and *sahabat* (companion)—which serve as tools in moral development, based on Muhammad Nur al-Hakim and Mohd Firdaus (2020) extracted from selected stories in *366 Collections of Malaysian Folktales* (p. 52–55). Fables concerning Sang Kancil, a quick-witted and mischievous mousedeer, is among the nation-renowned tales that mirror societal behaviour on “the dissatisfaction of the common people of different cultures against corrupt and unjust oppressors” (Kheong et al., 2019:255).

Puteri Gunung Ledang narrates the story of a princess who, when proposed to by Sultan Mahmud of Melaka, demands from him unimaginable wedding gifts to subtly reject the marriage proposal. The princess asks for seven gifts, which are:

... a bridge of gold and a bridge of silver from Malaka to Gunong Ledang: [...] seven trays of mosquitos' hearts, seven trays of mites' hearts, a vat of young areca-nut water, a vat of tears, a cup of the Raja's blood and a cup of his son's blood. (Winstedt, 1938:130; Brown, 1952:104)

Upon hearing the seventh wish of the princess, the proud Sultan revokes his proposal since it involves the sacrifice of his son's blood; the blood of his heir, descendant, and the future ruler of Melaka. Nor Hashimah and Maizura (2018) contend that the wishes are the princess' heuristic approach of rejecting Sultan Mahmud's proposal (p. 28). By imposing seven unimaginable wedding gifts and assuming Sultan Mahmud cannot accomplish them concludes that the princess refuses to be betrothed to him.

The tale of Puteri Gunung Ledang has evolved ever since it was first written down by Tun Sri Lanang in 1612. In 1613, Gudio de Eredia reported his first hearing of the mythical princess from the Malaios (*Melayus*) in his book titled *Description of Malacca*, which indicate the legend as an oral tale: “This story must be a fairy tale: but the natives regard it as true...” (Hijjas, 2010:250). Since the tale of Puteri Gunung Ledang has been retold many times in Malaysian popular media, the

characterization of the princess as the main protagonist varies. Film is an extremely popular medium in Malaysia. Whether it is blockbuster films or independent productions, the recognition is a guarantee and the same goes to *Puteri Gunung Ledang* (Saw, 2004) and *Magika* (Edry, 2010). *Puteri Gunung Ledang* (2004) offers another perspective of the tale following the altered characterization, plot, and genre. In the film, the princess is given another name, Gusti Putri Retno Dumillah, of the Majapahit Kingdom who abandons her royal status to reside on Mount Ledang, creating the character of Puteri Gunung Ledang (henceforth “PGL” referring to the character and “Puteri Gunung Ledang” referring to the folktale and film’s title).

Meanwhile, *Magika* exhibits PGL differently by turning the genre of the classic folktale from an epic to a comedy. It does not focus on PGL as its central character but on Ayu’s adventure to find her brother, Malik, who is trapped in a parallel world featuring many Malay folktales characters. Along with PGL as one of the Malay folktales characters, there is also Badang, Pak Pandir, Mak Andeh, Hang Tuah Lima Bersaudara, Mahsuri, Pak Belalang, Puteri Santubong, and Nenek Kebayan. The film’s inclusion of Malay folktales is comparable to the Hollywood animation movie series, *Shrek* (2001), *Shrek 2* (2004), *Shrek the Third* (2007), and *Shrek Forever After* (2010). This paper intends to accomplish several objectives, which are to analyse and compare the representations of PGL in *Puteri Gunung Ledang* and *Magika* from a poststructuralist feminist perspective in order to further discuss the implications of the different portrayals that may have affected the representations of PGL as a female protagonist in the films.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

As demonstrated in Grimms’ *Die Kinder-und Hausmärchen* (1812) and Lang’s *The Blue Fairy Book* (1889), Walt Disney pertained the image of women in Western folktales as subservient to men due to the traditional gender roles in re-animated folktales. Filmmakers from Europe, Asia, and America started criticizing the way Walt Disney Pictures re-animated folktales through the reproduction of folktale films with an essence of mockery or presentations of different perspectives. According to Sibielski (2019), Western filmmakers started challenging women’s characterizations in folktale adaptations to “escape from and comfort within an era of cultural clashes over which expressions of gender and sexuality are culturally validated” (p. 7). Due to that, women in 20<sup>th</sup> century folktale adaptations have been evolving and deviating from its common theme

of patriarchy, monarchy, and absolutism (Zipes, 2011a:9). Zipes (2011b) identifies that instead of using aristocrats and magical creatures, adaptation filmmakers opt for realistic characters to adopt the society's social and political situations, apart from acknowledging the normal social and psychological behaviours that are more relatable to the audience (p. 14). Even though an adaptation defies the original work in subtlety, its main objective is to enhance and transmit a new definition to the audience through the reanimation of the original piece. However, any reshaping in adaptation does not dismiss the deep relationship between the original and adaptation since an adaptation is an original's afterlife and an original is an adaptation's prehistory (Eggert, 2019:156). Zipes (2011b) writes that there is more than one honourable objective behind each adaptation, upon which he classifies Walt Disney's restoring mission as an act to dominate and become the influencer for makers of fairy-tale films (p. 14).

The recognition of published folktales has overshadowed the oral tales. For instance, many adapters of the Cinderella folktale acknowledge Perrault's *Cendrillon* (1657) as their source of inspiration, namely *Ever After: A Cinderella Story* (1998) by Fox Family Films and *Cinderella* (2015) by Walt Disney Pictures. Perrault's *Cendrillon* is the pioneer of submissive heroine tropes as he portrayed Cinderella as someone who lacks speech commands before receiving help from the fairy godmother. She manages to free herself from the household by taking control of her speech, making herself known to the prince to the extent of becoming his wife (Jones, 2013:20). Like Perrault's Cinderella, Danielle in *Ever After: A Cinderella Story* challenges the original subservient character of Cinderella by owning her rights beyond the linguistic competence that Disney and Grimms portrayed. She initiates the "empowered Cinderella" image in the film, where she projects independence by earning an income to support her stepmother and stepsisters. Unlike Perrault's *Cendrillon* and Grimms' *Cinderella*, Danielle settles on freedom by giving up the ideal concept of marriage for her stepsister. *Ever After: A Cinderella Story* is known as the first stretch for other "Cinderella" adaptation films in Hollywood, such as *Ella Enchanted* (2004) and *A Cinderella Story* (2004). Walt Disney and the Grimms' works are similar as they characterize women as subservient, rejecting the feminist theme of empowered women. Sibielski (2019) compared the Cinderella characters in many adaptations and found that Disney's *Cinderella* presents the version of Cinderella that modelled the passive 1950s Cinderella by reverting her character to the once-rejected theme of subservient woman and reliance on magical power to gain

happiness (p. 13). It is undeniable that Disney's strategy in reanimating folktales managed to translate the oral tales into films, yet Zipes (2011a) claims that *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) highlight the domestication of regressive theme, which he terms as "the degeneration of utopia" (p. 191).

Despite that, Zipes (2015) acknowledges Disney's effort in challenging their predecessor's passive heroine trope by releasing *Maleficent* (2014), an alternative version of *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) (p. 298). Disney's *Maleficent* has rejected the notion of submitting oneself to true love, which has always been embedded in their previous fairy-tale adaptations. The film presents a different version of *Sleeping Beauty* by retelling the story through Aurora's perspective and recharacterizing Maleficent, the villain, as a fairy who turned evil upon betrayal of true love. The fashion of retelling folktales from an unfamiliar perspective also appears in Coover's *Stepmother* (2004), where the novella shifts the protagonist's role to the stepmother instead of the biological daughter of the newlywed husband. As a result, it has created a new "intertextual space that allows for the exploration of further possibilities" for the audience, likewise to *Maleficent* (Williams, 2010:257). Many filmmakers have tried to challenge the theme of subservient and passive women in their adaptations, as seen in the remaking of Grimms' *Snow White*—*Mirror, Mirror* (2011) and *Snow White and the Huntsman* (2012)—but the films implicitly weaken their mission as the female protagonists need to embrace manhood by improving their fighting skills, learning how to use a weapon, and receiving guidance from men to defeat the antagonists (Zipes, 2015:280).

Kurahashi Yumiko, contradictorily, twisted *Snow White*'s passive character in her work, *Shirayuki-hime*, which reflects "a new kind of antirealistic fiction that would portray the reverse side of reality, like the negative of picture" (Cardi, 2012:195). Kurahashi deforms the original tale by narrating the negative consequences of *Snow White*'s passivity that disables her from achieving a happy ending like in Grimms. According to Cardi (2012), her extreme passivity turns into foolishness, which leads her to be entangled in rape with the woodsmen and a sexual liaison with seven dwarves. On this, Kurahashi writes, "...and because she was by nature gentle and obedient she quickly learnt, for her age, to be good in bed" (p. 199). Lee (2015) mentions that Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid* is among the popular tales adopted in East Asia, besides *The Little Match*, *The Ugly Duckling*, and *The Red Shoes* (p. 208). Unlike Kurahashi, Ogawa Yoko provokes *Little Mermaid*'s subservient character by imposing

the gendered passive narratives and the traditional female roles on mermen. In contrast to Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*, Ogawa portrays the merman as a submissive protagonist who "devotes his whole life to mermaids and dies without wanting anything in return" (Fraser, 2013:185). Kurahashi and Ogawa adapted the classics from a contrasting perspective, but they both have the same mission of rejecting the subservient heroines' plot in traditional European folktales shown in Grimms and Andersen.

*The Ballad of Mulan* by Frankel (1976) was adapted and animated by Walt Disney Pictures in 1998, but Brocklebank (2000) believes that the production has deconstructed what she calls as the "Disneyfied" passive heroine trope. Following the ambiguous shifting from passive to active women in *The Little Mermaid* (1989) and *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), Disney's *Mulan* has significantly eliminated the gendered narrative by inculcating the female heroic plot in the animation. However, Brocklebank (2000) questions the plot of *Mulan* as her action of taking the heroic path may suggest that she "reproduce(s) the same dynamics of conditioning and socialization" by yielding to masculinity via masculine cross-dressing (p. 279). In *The Ballad of Mulan*, Mulan embraces her womanhood by "carrying out the traditional domestic work of weaving, associated with women's roles and femininity", which Disney decided to abandon (Duggan, 2013:36). Disney miscarried the original narrative and, consequently, the film reduces Mulan's feminine potential to becoming the unexemplary daughter who fails to do work chores and bring her family honour by marrying into a good family (Brocklebank, 2000:275). A major adaptation problem in *Mulan* is Disney's manner of portraying Eastern culture. Yin (2011) suggests that in *Mulan*, "Chinese culture was denounced and deprecated as an Oriental tyranny" to portray the East's hostility towards individual free will (p. 59). Disney's *Mulan* remains the romantic theme that conforms to European folktale traditions, whereas in China's adaptation of *The Ballad of Mulan*, *The Red Detachment of Women* (1960), the sentimental love between Wu Qionghua and Hong Changqing was dismissed by turning them from being lovers to a spiritual father-daughter relationship (Li, 2020:7).

The notion of denying patriarchal narratives is apparent in Asian folktale adaptations by portraying more female than male protagonists. Japanese folktales manage to dismiss the common European heroic narratives by allowing women to "figure as active agents, noblewomen who successfully reject male advances", as seen in Isao Takahata's *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* (2013) (Napier, 2015:167; Rendell & Denison, 2018:10). The film



did not only strengthen the female role of Princess Kaguya through her rejection upon marriage with the emperor but also dismiss the Disneyfied ending of “happily ever after”. Napier (2015) mentions Hayao Kawai’s description of Japanese tales’ ending as a “situation of nothing” by reflecting the truth that endings are not like the ones portrayed in Disney films where “all plot twists are neatly fastened, evil is punished [and] good is rewarded” (p. 167). Murai (2015) suggests that Japan started promoting their own opinion of fairy tale without being attached to the Western perspectives after the 1990s (p. 35).

The persistence against heroic narratives is presented in the Malaysian folktale of Mahsuri, in which a woman is appointed as the main protagonist. In the adaptation of Mahsuri, *The Curse* (2007), Lee Su-Ann reconstructs Mahsuri in the portrayal of Azreen. As Sharifah Aishah (2018) states, Azreen relies on herself to counter the patriarchal strictures instead of the curse as “a mark of her transcendence and agency as a feminist protagonist” (p. 5). On the other side, Hindi fairy-tale films comply with European folktales by presenting more male protagonists with a central theme of romantic love and happy endings, which work in degrading women’s representation. Yet, Naithani (2015) claims that Hindi fairy-tale films take in the socially constructed patriarchal setting to suggest the women’s dilemma and invite changes in that society (p. 198). In view of Indian folktales, Maraya and Maniam (2017) mention adaptations of women in the epics in Malaysian Tamil short stories, such as Sita Dewi of Ramayana in Govindasamy’s *Kozhip Pannai* (2002) (p. 3). Such works subtly establish the image of empowered women without disputing the Tamil traditional culture. Thus, this shows that folktale adaptations have tried to challenge the common subservient women theme that has always been embedded in European folktales either by changing or countering the narratives.

Scholars believe that PGL reconstructed the patriarchal society by declining the marriage proposal through metaphorical wishes to simultaneously reject the tyrannical king’s governance (Nor Hashimah & Maizura, 2018:21; Siti Faridah & Bazrul, 2017:227). However, Saw’s film, *Puteri Gunung Ledang* (2010), endangered the princess’ strength by highlighting the heroism of Hang Tuah. Muhammad Jailani (2018) interpreted the film as a platform to rewrite Hang Tuah’s narrative instead of PGL. He wrote, “The film seals the image of Hang Tuah as an elite warrior of ancient Malacca whose love towards Puteri Gunung Ledang ultimately led to the fall of the kingdom” (Muhammad Jailani, 2018:4). On a different note, Hijjas (2010) noted that the film is both “desacralized and

depoliticized” since the filmmakers innovated a legend that was unknown to historians, which is the love story between PGL and Hang Tuah (p. 247). Edry also exhibited a different PGL in *Magika* (2010), but past studies on the film are mainly on the technicalities of the music and computer-generated imagery (CGI). Since there is no original and definite text for the myth, the interpretation of PGL in modern adaptations insinuates subjectivity.

Up until recently, through the production of Les Copaque’s *Upin & Ipin: Keris Siamang Tunggal* (2019), Malaysian folktales only managed to reach international platforms such as the Oscar and Montreal International Animation Film Festival (BERNAMA, 2020). Ninot Aziz’s effort in spreading Nusantara folktales to the native English-speaking community should also be recognized through her publications such as *Hikayat: From the Ancient Malay Kingdoms* (2012). Previous research findings into Southeast Asian folktales have been published by local scholars and, in the case of Malaysian folktales, by Malaysian scholars. This can be seen in the small number of scholarly literature on PGL, specifically on the female characterization of the mythical princess.

## COMPARING SAW’S AND EDRY’S PUTERI GUNUNG LEDANG

### *Saw’s Puteri Gunung Ledang*

According to Cartmell’s (1999) categorization of adaptation, Saw’s version falls into a commentary adaptation of *Puteri Gunung Ledang*, which Hutcheon describes as “the politics of the source text, or those of the new *mise-en-scène*, or both, usually by means of alteration or addition” (p. 27). Saw perceived *Puteri Gunung Ledang* in a new light by characterizing the princess with a familial background, something that Winstedt preferred to keep anonymous. The princess is given another name, Gusti Putri Retno Dumillah of Majapahit, and she is retconned as someone who abandons her royal status to reside on Mount Ledang, thereby creating the character of PGL. Sonnet (1999) identifies this type of adaptation as a production to “rehistoricize” by recreating the history on screen since the archives provide narrowed cultural contexts (p. 54).

Unlike Winstedt (1938), who focused on the princess’ beauty and wisdom in adapting the historical narrative, Saw recreated the princess by having a male counterpart. Saw demonstrates a major alteration to the original plot by establishing a backstory for the tale, specifically by introducing a love interest for the princess. The film focuses on the love

story of PGL with Hang Tuah, an admiral of the Malacca Sultanate who, in the latter part of the story, participates in the proposal's entourage. This new essence in the film managed to design a conflict that attracted new target audiences and manipulate the characterization of PGL. The film also projects the tale as a recreation that "generates the same dichotomy between universality and a politicized subject position" (Hutcheon, 2006:107).

Hang Tuah's engagement in the recent adaptation of *Puteri Gunung Ledang* is regular, as seen in Saw's versions. However, Saw included the character to the extent that the admiral is one of the leading roles in the film. The alteration in Hang Tuah's character led to the recreation of PGL, which affected her role as the main protagonist. The recreation of the princess does weaken her portrayal as a once-strong female protagonist in Malay folktale. Saw starts the film by inducing a narrator's voice to inform the audience about the love between Hang Tuah and PGL.

**NARRATOR:** Two lovers, separated by distance and worldly position, sealing a promise to be together. Across the oceans and over the mountains, a legendary tale of the greatest love. (Saw, 2004, 00:00:42 – 00:00:59)

From this point in the film, the alteration emerges following the shift from the greatness of the princess to the greatness of the love between the two unrequited lovers. Different from how Winstedt highlights the magnificence of the princess by emphasizing on her beauty and wisdom, Saw "rehistoricizes" the folktale by adding an extratextual context for the contemporary audience—the great romance—which Sonnet (1999) believes to be an offer of cinematic pleasures (p. 54).

However, this fashion can be signified as an attempt towards "Disneyfication", which rejects Sanders' view on modern adaptations being resistant to the idea, as seen in *Shrek* and Rob Marshall's *Into the Woods* (2014). Sanders (2006) highlights that these modern adaptations resist Disney's method of emphasizing on happy endings to "transgress established social, cultural, geographical and temporal boundaries" by adding content and context for the new audiences (p. 106). Unfortunately, Saw does not present the modern understandings of the idea following the weakened representation of the princess via the presence of a love interest. The installation of Hang Tuah as the love interest is in fact a form of "Disneyfication" by Saw that weakened the strength of the princess, which is absent in Winstedt.

From Saw's cinematic lens, PGL is vulnerable compared to Winstedt's PGL, which can be seen in several scenes in the film. Although the princess is described magnificently in historical manuscripts, Saw reshaped her as someone who is dependent on her lover, making her leave Java for Malacca to be closer to Hang Tuah. In contrast to Winstedt's PGL, Saw also altered the princess' identity, which restricts her freedom in pursuing love since she has an older kin, the king of Majapahit, who is responsible for finding her a husband. PGL's portrayal as a female protagonist worsens when her brother objectifies her by making her a guarantee of the country's freedom through marriage with the Sultan of Malacca.

**PATIH:** We may be of a different faith from them, but if you, Gusti Adipati, would so allow our princess can be offered in marriage to bridge our two kingdoms. (Saw, 2004, 00:17:54 – 00:18:16)

**DATUK BENDAHARA:** Pray that with this marriage, the Kingdom of Malacca can put an end to Demak's attack, Your Highness. (Saw, 2004, 00:33:19 – 00:33:32)

The empowering of PGL in Saw's film is a slow process starting at the 50:00 mark, when she uses her magical power to create obstructions for Hang Tuah, Sang Setia, and Tun Mamat's entourage, who have come to propose her for Sultan Mahmud at the peak of Mount Ledang. The obstructing scenes can be found in Winstedt's and, as such, Saw tried to keep the narrative of PGL similar to the adaptations before him. It is in the subsequent scenes that PGL realizes that Hang Tuah's loyalty to the throne is bigger than his love for her and that awakens her strength as a female protagonist. Since then, she releases herself from love madness and starts voicing her own opinion, rather than whining and cooping at the mountain while waiting for her lover's arrival.

Unlike the narrative from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Saw twisted the plot to portray the strength of the princess as the female protagonist that was absent up to this part of the film. Saw added scenes that strengthen the image of the princess in the denouement of the movie after the Sultan's agreement to her wishes. Not understanding the discreet rejection from the princess, Sultan Mahmud accepts all wishes, including the seventh wish: "A case of blood flowing still. The body waits its turn. A bowlful. The answer is... The blood of my son" (Saw, 2004). The acceptance of the wishes is not based on the 17<sup>th</sup> century narrative since Winstedt wrote that the Sultan

immediately dropped his means to betroth the princess upon hearing the seventh wish as a rejection from the princess.

“All that she demands we can provide, save only the blood of our son; that we cannot provide, for our heart would not suffer us to take it.” (Winstedt, 1938:131; Brown, 1952:104)

Saw altered the narrative by adding a female voice to the princess that was missing in the older manuscripts. In the film, PGL descends from the mountain to stop Sultan Mahmud’s cruelty to kill his only heir, only to prove his sincerity in marrying the princess. She utters:

**PGL:** “Your Majesty. To sacrifice for love is divine. To sacrifice for one’s country is indeed noble. But where is the honour in sacrifice if one’s hands are tainted with the blood of an innocent?” (Saw, 2004, 01:25:57 – 01:26:21)

This alteration does not reflect the weak portrayal of the princess in the older manuscripts, but fortifies the existing strength by adding dominant discourses.

According to Chaudhuri (2006), starting from the 1980s, film theories have strived to “reclaim female agency within dominant discourses rather than merely viewing those discourses as oppressive” (p. 62). In the film, PGL dominates the argument with Sultan Mahmud by having more uttered words—232 out of 382 words precisely. Among the 232 words, PGL speaks about the repressed female rights that started to reconstruct under feminist movements in the 1960s (Tyson, 2014:80).

**PGL:** Are there any among you who have wondered why I have come to this country? I followed my heart. That is my right. The right of every human being. The right to choose. I don’t want to wither away in the palace. I want to be free. Free to love and be loved. Not to belittle Malacca. If Malacca’s greatness lies in your hands, why do you need this marriage to save my country? (Saw, 2004, 01:28:17 – 01:29:14)

Saw’s deconstruction of the historical narrative provides an articulation from a feminist viewpoint, as Sanders assumes from the alteration of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* in Marina Warner’s *Indigo* (1992) as Miranda and Sycorax also receive an extended voice despite being marginalized characters in the novel. By having linguistic competencies, PGL manages

to escape the classic cinema stereotypes of female characters that Kaja Silverman describes as “invariably tied to the bodily spectacle, have little or no authoritative voice, unreliable, thwarted or acquiescence” (Chaudhuri, 2006:45), though it was indeed a classic in the Malay Archipelago.

### **Edry’s *Puteri Gunung Ledang***

The minor representation of PGL in Edry’s *Magika* (2010) has re-interpreted the classic female protagonist in a completely different manner than Winstedt and Saw. This parodic film manages to present PGL differently, which works appropriately for a film released in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, regarding an old sprinter’s distress.

Edry’s PGL is portrayed as a fragile, decisive, and negative character in *Magika*, which is foreign to the original narrative. Winstedt and Saw presented the princess with a strong, powerful, and positive personality, while Edry deemed her differently by distancing from the traditional narrative. Within five minutes of her on-screen appearance, PGL is passive and constantly complaining about her post-narrative appearance. Since it is set after the proposal of the Sultan of Malacca, she has been in a depressing condition. She has gained weight, is ageing poorly, and suffers from a dreaded single life. Her depressing situation is expressed in her first appearance in the movie, where she sings:

**PGL:** Who is that in the mirror?

She resembles me,

But she doesn’t look as pretty,

As I was many years ago,

Age has taken its toll,

I was once slim but now I’ve gone out of shape,

With wrinkled and sagging skin,

Even my grey hair is receding.

(Edry, 2010, 00:27:47 – 00:28:28)

PGL's physical condition is seen as the problem since she is no longer the princess that men desired. She has stooped down to the level where she wants a potion to reverse her appearance to the time of her golden era:

**PGL:** Find me a potion to turn back time,

That will make me young again,

As young as a teenage girl,

Make me the fairest of them all,

Give me a figure,

That is to be admired and desired.

(Edry, 2010, 00:28:29 – 00:29:03)

As mentioned before, Western parody fairy-tale films, such as the *Shrek* film series (2001, 2004, 2007) and *Into the Woods*, approached their reimagining in order to hold out against “Disneyfication” that foregrounds on the heroine’s happy ending with her Prince Charming (Sanders, 2006:106). However, Edry thinks otherwise since he brings back the image of a passive PGL who is distressed from having no husband in her life despite having the same design in revisiting the folktales as the *Shrek* films do. Moreover, Edry partially agrees with Sanders’ implication as PGL in *Magika* discards her passivity and desperation to find a husband once she gets to be young and pretty. Nevertheless, it is difficult to ignore PGL’s initial mental condition since she is known for her strong female protagonist role in the classic narrative, such as in Winstedt. In *Magika*, PGL is criticized by her minister for acting overly proud and egoistic in rejecting the proposal of Sultan Mahmud, while Saw portrayed her rejection of the proposal differently, that is, as a symbol of her rights as a woman.

### **Male Gaze and Love Interest in *Puteri Gunung Ledang* (2004)**

Mulvey (1989) implies that women in film pose in a traditional exhibitionistic role, or what she codes as “to-be-looked-at-ness”, which allows the manifestation of fantasies by men (p. 19). Saw attempted to make the film more gender neutral by adding the male hero, which dismisses the projection of a strong woman character that is grounded in the original

folktale. He applied Mulvey’s “male gaze” term in the narrative via the male characters, Hang Tuah and Sultan Mahmud. In the film, PGL exhibits herself to Malacca’s noblemen through a dance performance, awakening Sultan Mahmud’s desire to marry her. Hang Tuah, who tries to avert his eyes during the performance, is then seduced by PGL herself as she swiftly brushes some flowers towards his face, signalling her emotional inclination. Hollywood filmmakers believe that the technique qualifies the audience to control the narrative by associating with the male gaze. However, it dismisses and degrades PGL’s portrayal as an active protagonist, mirroring Edry’s characterization of the princess. Mulvey (1989) implies that by enabling the “male gaze” in film, the active power will deliberately pass to the hero, in this case, Hang Tuah, even though the main protagonist is PGL (p. 20).

The traditional exhibitionistic role that PGL portrays in Saw’s film has perpetuated the “unconscious patriarchal society”, which should not be present in the adaptation of an anti-patriarchal Puteri Gunung Ledang folktale. It is apparent in the film that the princess is portrayed passively according to the patriarchal order’s representation of women. Unlike Winstedt, Saw sought to “highlight [...] perplexing gaps, absences and silences within the original” by surrendering the princess’ active power to male agents in the film—such as Hang Tuah, Sultan Mahmud, and Gusti Adipati—thus signifying her submission to the patriarchal society (Sanders, 2006:126). The most apparent evidence of the “unconscious patriarchal society” is the existence of a male hero and the love interest of PGL, Hang Tuah, in the film. His existence threatens her power since he possesses the binary active role against her as the Other. PGL’s role as an object of attraction for the male (Hang Tuah) gaze weakens her strength as she deliberately displays herself in a “reassuring rather than dangerous” nature (Mulvey, 1989:21). Furthermore, her clinging emotions towards Hang Tuah in the film have further proven her to be submissive, which opposes the anti-patriarchal Puteri Gunung Ledang folktale.

**PGL:** Should you not return, I’ll come to you. (Saw, 2004, 00:01:47 – 00:01:50)

**PGL:** I want to be part of his dreams. (Saw, 2004, 00:02:38 – 00:02:41)

**PGL:** But if I marry the Sultan of Malacca, then every day I will have to face the man I truly love, Tuah (Saw, 2004, 00:37:08 – 00:37:17)



**PGL:** There is no other love for me apart from you, my dearest (Saw, 2004, 00:59:16 – 00:59:21)

**PGL:** Oh, my love, please forget these orders. It is your love I long for and nothing else. Do you know how happy I am now just to be reunited with you? It seems time has numbed your heart. (Saw, 2004, 01:00:16 – 01:00:59)

Saw's PGL suffers linguistic incapacity, as seen in the Western folktales' passive heroine trope. Chaudhuri (2006) insinuates that because of the "castration", women in films lack not only the body (phallus) but also their voice (p. 48). Since Saw's PGL has passive power, her voice is contained in monologues and in silent conversations where utterances are not voiced—this is what Chaudhuri (2006) writes as "the interior of the narrative" (p. 52). In the film, PGL converses silently with her brother, Gusti Adipati (GA), during their unworldly encounter in Malacca:

**PGL:** My beloved brother, Gusti Adipati, why have you forsaken me? Why have you gone straight to the Sultan?

**GA:** Would you have welcomed me? What kind of a woman are you? In your position, to debase your dignity and chase a man so beneath your station? Have you lost your mind?

**PGL:** What wrong have I committed? I have decided to follow my heart before I lose everything else. Is this wrong?

**GA:** Follow your heart? Since when did the Royal Princess of Java have the right to follow her heart? That is treason! Your blood courses through my veins too, my darling sister. Our blood belongs to our land. But as fate has dictated, you found your way here. We all have our dreams, sister, but the reality is we have our responsibilities too. Do not fight the destiny we are born to fulfil.

(Saw, 2004, 00:35:23)

PGL's passivity reaches its end after knowing her love will not be reciprocated by Hang Tuah, thereafter positioning herself in an active role. This is because she is no longer a heroine who awaits her hero, thus destroying the passive heroine trope and substituting it with an anti-patriarchal plot where she is her own hero. Like Charles Perrault's

Cinderella, PGL also starts commanding her speech, as seen during her conversation with Sultan Mahmud in the film's denouement, to redress her role as a strong anti-patriarchal female protagonist.

### **Comedic Princess in *Magika* (2010)**

Edry approached PGL's narrative comedically, which substitutes her factual personality as told in history. *Magika* serves a deconstruct PGL in contrast to Winstedt and Saw. Edry perceived the mythical princess as a bricolage, which Klages (2006) believes can be shifted for its non-immutable nature (p. 61). He shifted the personality of the princess from a confident protagonist to a diffident side character, while retaining the narration about the Sultan of Malacca's proposal. This approach is in accordance with Claude Levi-Strauss' *The Structural Study of Myth*, which reacts to myths as narratives that can be altered without losing their basic shape or structure, though it is historically specific (Klages, 2006:44). Despite the different portrayal of PGL, Edry scores in presenting the character of the princess without being heavily influenced by the original narrative. Sigmund Freud suggests that these "uncanny" appeals propose an intention to recreate the narrative as "both a refusal and rehearsal of loss", here referring to the folktales (Sanders, 2006:107), as claimed by Edry. This can also be seen in how Edry inserted comedic elements to rebuke the princess' wishes to reject Sultan Mahmud's proposal, remarking those wishes as her being too proud and egotistical.

**BENDAHARA:** It's all your fault though. You were too *proud and egotistical*. When you were still young and gorgeous even the Sultan of Melaka fancied you, Sultan Mahmud. All the women wanted him. But you were too proud. You asked for ridiculous demands. Mosquito blood, bed bugs blood, that's just crazy. (Edry, 2010, 00:30:24 – 00:30:45)

It is an ironic claim proposed by Edry in his interview about the younger generations' favouritism towards Western folktales—such as Cinderella, Snow White, or others—instead of Malay folktales (Nur Safina, 2010) despite PGL's passivity in *Magika*. Despite his claim, PGL in the film is replicating the characterizations of Western folktales, which bring back Grimms' passive heroine trope in the narrative. Although the Puteri Gunung Ledang folktale has been upholding the reputation of women likewise to China's Mulan, Edry refused to preserve it in the same manner.

As Saw established the princess' character similar to that of Winstedt, as a strong female protagonist, Edry introduced a diffident PGL to rationalize the situation that is not relevant to reality. In the film, Edry substituted those ridiculous demands with luxury goods as the latter is more practical than mosquitoes and bed bugs' blood.

**BENDAHARA:** Why didn't you ask for useful things such as Armani shoes or Gucci bags? Or at least a Zhulian ring? (Edry, 2010, 00:30:46 – 00:30:56)

In comparison to another similar genre movie, *Shrek the Third* (2007), Miller included other folktale princesses—such as Cinderella, Snow White, Aurora, and many more—where he dismisses their passivity and upgrades their characterizations to highlight women's empowerment. Instead, Edry re-characterized PGL, just as Grimms' alteration, to include the heavy reliance on marriage and priority of beauty above all else.

It is a noteworthy effort of Edry to pivot his focus onto the reality of a spinster by mentioning the “midlife crisis”. Angela Carter also devised this design of appropriating folktales in her rewritings of *Beauty and the Beast*, where she mentions the once-taboo issue of “female menstruation” (Sanders, 2006:113). Edry switched the princess' extraordinary characteristics with a more rational and relevant condition to encourage engagement with the audience. Sanders (2006) believes that this adaptation method works to connect the narrative into “a social, even socio-historical, context, constituting in some respects an attempt to rationalize their magic” (p. 107). In other respects, Edry's condoning of the Western portrayal of women in folktales by projecting a regressive image of PGL that neglects her powerful being as a female protagonist should be addressed. This issue also exists in Saw's film since he altered the folktale according to “the so-called “Disneyfication” that Sanders (2006) believes must be resisted in folktales' reimagining (p. 106). Edry and Saw portrayed the princess in a passive heroine trope, signifying their dismissal of the great history of Southeast Asian women who practiced anti-patriarchy culture. The “Disneyfication” of PGL disregards the reputation of Southeast Asian female rulers, such as Safiyat Ad-Din, and strong women in Malay folktales, such as Walinong Sari, Puteri Saadong, Mahsuri, and PGL herself. Saw re-establishes PGL's image at the end of his film, but Edry fails to do the same. He submits his representation of PGL like the passive female protagonists, such as Snow White and Cinderella, with no intention of revising her character. On that

account, it signifies that *Magika* insinuates the degradation of PGL as Edry fails to project the princess as a strong female protagonist that appears in the folktale and writings of Winstedt and Saw.

## CONCLUSION

The alterations by Saw and Edry can be approached as either boosting or degrading PGL's character as a strong woman found in Malay folktales. Saw manages to preserve PGL as the strong main protagonist despite having many alterations in the film. He stretches the history by devising a well-developed plot for PGL, which Sanders (2006) suggests as one of the appropriate adaptation methods in uncovering hidden plots (p. 155). However, Saw's idea of adding Hang Tuah as the male hero appears to degrade PGL by presenting her passively against Hang Tuah in the early parts of the film.

Edry's design of regressing PGL in *Magika* (2010) condones the Western passive heroine trope and forsakes the history of powerful women in Southeast Asia. He fails to portray the strength of the princess, as seen in Saw's adaptation, as his film satirizes the tale in a comedy genre. He regresses PGL's character into becoming a diffident princess who seeks to find love at an old age by resorting to consuming a youth potion to be young again. By introducing a male hero and regressing the princess, Saw and Edry threaten the qualities of powerful women that have been established in Malay folktales, originating in the history of Southeast Asian women. These alterations may function as a stepping stone to develop PGL from a passive heroine to a strong and active protagonist, but it does not disregard its potential in threatening the anti-patriarchal nature of the princess.

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