Agency, Adaptation, and Audience: Re-visioning the Legend of *Mahsuri* in Selected Contemporary Malaysian Young Adult Fiction

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SARE: Southeast Asian Review of English, Vol. 55, Issue 2, 2018

Abstract

The legend of *Mahsuri* is inseparable from the historical and cultural identity of the people of Langkawi, Kedah. Despite its graphic depiction of mob violence and brutality, and perhaps even because of it, the legend transmitted through the folktale, retains its hold on the collective memory of many Malaysians. As the oldest and most widely known form of literature for children, the folktale reflects the concerns of a "monarchistic, patriarchal, and feudal society" and its attendant limitations (Zipes 8). Yet folktales are also among the most subversive texts in children's literature, and often "support the rights of disadvantaged members of the population – children, women, and the poor – against the establishment" (Lurie 16). In acknowledging the interrogative power of the folktale, especially its ability to challenge the ideological position of the Malay woman as constructed by dominant interests, this essay argues that the legendary story of *Mahsuri*, as well as its subsequent adaptations, provides important insights into the contemporary relevance of the folktale to the contestation of the patriarchal, feudalistic, and nationalistic discourses circulating in modern, multicultural Malaysia. This essay discusses two contemporary textual representations of the Mahsuri legend – Lee Su Ann's young adult murder mystery, *The Curse* (2005), and Preeta Samarasan's short story of interracial love, "Mahsuri" (2011) – in order to illustrate how each draws attention to the subjugated status of women in contemporary Malay society. As riveting examples of Malaysian young adult fiction, both stories reflect the critical engagement with, and interrogation of, issues of gender, racial, and religious identity in contemporary multicultural Malaysia by foregrounding the struggle for power and possession over the body of the idealized Malay woman and through their mutual emphasis on the repercussions of Mahsuri's "curse" on their protagonists.

Keywords: folktales, children's literature in Malaysia, young adult fiction, Malay women in literature.

One cannot makeup stories: one can only retell in new ways the stories one has already heard. Let us agree on this: that we live our lives through texts. These may be read, or chanted, or experienced electronically, or come to us, like the murmurings of our mothers, telling us what conventions demand. Whatever their form or medium, these stories are what have formed us all, they are what we use to make our new fictions […]. Out of old tales, we must make new lives.

Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Hamlet's Mother and Other Women* (1990, 109)

Of the many popular folktales and legends from Malaysia, the legend of Mahsuri, the maiden of Langkawi, Kedah, must surely count as one of the most controversial and gruesome in the collection. With its themes of jealousy, polygamy, mob violence, vengeance, and class struggle projected upon the brutalized body of Mahsuri as the victim of slander and injustice, the tale appears as such to be a rather contentious choice for the consumption of young adult readers, even more so impressionable children. Yet such themes were largely prevalent in a genre widely known to present "the stark realities of power politics without disguising the violence and brutality of everyday life", and in which stories dealing with "starvation and abandonment of children, rape, corporeal punishment, and ruthless exploitation" familiar to the lower classes in pre-capitalist societies were common (Zipes 8). As the oldest and most widely known form of literature for children, the folktale, with its central theme of "might makes right", reflected the concerns of a "monarchistic, patriarchal,

and feudal society" (Zipes 8) and its attendant limitations. Thus, the presence and use of magic and the supernatural in such tales are often linked to the "wish-fulfilment and utopian projections of the people", and "serve to rupture the feudal confines and represent metaphorically the conscious and unconscious desires of the lower classes" (Zipes 8). Similarly, as Alison Lurie argues, folktales are among the most subversive texts in children's literature, and often "support the rights of disadvantaged members of the population – children, women, and the poor – against the establishment" (16). Apart from being perceived as a middle- and working-class genre, the folktale was also associated with women, with stories passed down as a form of oral tradition from generation to generation, and that frequently depicted women not only as central characters, but also often endowed with magical or supernatural powers (Lurie 19).

Rooted as they were in oral traditions, folk tales, like fairy tales, "had never been explicitly told for children" and "do not belong to children" (Zipes, *Fairytales* xi). In examining the fairy tale as a specific type of folk narrative and its origins as a literary genre for children, Zipes notes that "educated writers purposely appropriated the oral folktale and converted it into a type of literary discourse about mores, values, and manners so that children and adults would become civilized according to the social code of that time" (3). In short, as Lurie, Cashdan, Haase, and Jones have all noted,[1] as part of the process of being adapted for the consumption of children, and out of concern over the inherent dangers of "wild" folktales on impressionable and imaginative young minds, many of these tales underwent "sanitization" in the hands of nineteenth-century European middle-class editors and collectors, and were constructed as "part and parcel of a general civilizing process" meant to reinforce "dominant religious and patriarchal attitudes about gender, mating, law, and order" (xi) and to instruct their young audiences on the significance of morality, charity, virtue, and good conduct. Likewise, Maria Tatar observes that once folktales reached print by the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they "lost their subversive edge and became assimilated into the official canon of children's literature, which had always been more interested in producing docile minds than playful bodies" (5), and thus "took on a protective didactic coloring that has been virtually impossible to remove" (11).[2] The presence of an "adult agenda" in the production of children's literature in the nineteenth century thus explains the popularity of cautionary tales and exemplary stories as the two main models available for writers who were adapting folktales into stories for children of the time (8). The emphasis on moral lessons and the punishment of villains, particularly for "disobedience" and "deviant conduct" (25), thus accounts for much of the added violence and "remarkably vivid scenes of torture and execution" (7) present in such tales.

Yet the folktale and the fairy tale have also benefitted richly from their evolution into "a conflicted cultural field", in which writers use such stories "to question conformity to the dominant civilizing process of a society" (Zipes xi). In this regard, as Victoria Flanagan points out, the retelling or revision of traditional fairy tales has been one of the most significant tasks undertaken by feminist writers for children and adolescents, perceiving such tales as offering the opportunity "to promote feminine agency and interrogate normative

constructs of gender and sexuality" and as the ideal space "within which to contest patriarchal notions of gender and power" (26-27). Such feminist revisions "emanate from a basic impulse for change within society", and play a significant role in "questioning socialization" by enabling audiences to reflect on how such tales function in the conditioning of women and children (Zipes 14). In a similar vein, Stephen Benson, citing Sandra Gilbert's "revisionary imperative" in feminist theory to "review, reimagine, rethink, rewrite, revise, and reinterpret" historical and cultural events and documents, notes that feminist adaptations of the traditional fairy tale constitute "a re-energizing of a tradition and subversion of traditional interpretations" (Gilbert, cited in Benson 200).[3]

The traditional Malay folk tale, like many of those from the Southeast Asian region, reflects the world view as well as the cosmological order of the Malay world, and to an extent, the ideology of the existing ruling class, with most of the stories relating to the social relationship between the masses and the rulers, and with the inequality in status between the ruler and the ruled often being emphasized (Selat 53). Such tales not only served as entertainment for both young and old among the common village folk, but were also meant to "educate and inculcate good moral values in the people" (53). The instances of gender stereotyping seen in many traditional Malay folk tales written for children in Malaysia thus reflect and perpetuate patriarchal and feudalistic values in their heavily didactic underpinnings, often by emphasizing female virtue and moral behavior, a trait that has also been observed in European fairy tales (Zipes 39-56, Tatar 94-119). Tales like *Puteri Santubong* and *Bawang Merah, Bawang Putih,*[4] among others, demonstrate how the definition of "feminine" qualities in such stories is influenced by an inherently patriarchal ideology, where women appear either as dysfunctional figures in conflict with each other, or passive "damsels in distress" awaiting rescue by the hero. Exemplary heroines are often physically attractive, chaste, filial, and rewarded for their submissiveness by marriage to a rich and/or powerful man. Conversely, female villains appear as wicked stepmothers or sisters, obstacles or rivals in the heroine's quest for the love of a worthy man, and consequently punished through death or marginalization (Osman, Lai, and Kassim 413-414).

The plot, setting, and themes of the legendary tale of *Mahsuri* reflect all of the concerns raised in such folklore scholarship, particularly the class struggle between the peasantry and aristocracy, and the oppression of the marginalized poor, revolving as it does around the white-blooded maiden from a rural village on the island of Langkawi, who is accused unjustly of adultery and executed publicly in cold blood. Born under mysterious circumstances to a poor paddy farmer, Pandak Maya, and his wife, Mek Andak Alang, the beautiful Mahsuri attracts many suitors, including the wealthy village Chieftain, Datuk Karma Jaya, who already has a wife, Mahura, and several grown children. Humiliated by her husband's intention to marry Mahsuri, Mahura bears a grudge against her. Although Mahsuri marries their son Mat Deris instead, and bears him a son, Mat Arus, Mahura remains jealous of Mahsuri and vows revenge. When Mat Deris is called to war, Mahura spreads rumours about Mahsuri's apparent infidelity, and convinces Datuk Karma Jaya and the entire village of

Mahsuri's affair with the itinerant poet and storyteller, Deramang. In the commotion that ensues, Deramang manages to escape but the helpless Mahsuri is arrested and sentenced to death for adultery without trial, despite her protestations of innocence and the appeals of her aggrieved family for justice and sympathy. The executioner makes several attempts to stab Mahsuri but fails; she confesses that she can only be killed with a sacred *keris*.[5] When the executioner finally kills Mahsuri, white blood gushes from her wound and white mist surrounds her, proving her innocence and supernatural powers. Before she dies, Mahsuri curses the villagers with seven generations of bad luck for the senseless accusations and injustice inflicted upon her. Langkawi is invaded by the Siamese and left desolate and barren ("padang jarak, padang tekukur"[6]) for many generations, emphasizing the potency of Mahsuri's curse. Aptly glorified as a symbol of righteousness and purity, her story serves as a stark reminder of the power of female agency in the face of societal injustice and patriarchal oppression, warning against envy, rumour-mongering, and cruelty toward the innocent.

The tragic tale of *Mahsuri* is clearly inseparable from the historical and cultural identity of the people of Langkawi, and continues to be appropriated for its commercial tourism potential, an intangible cultural legacy imparted to the millions of visitors to the island annually, all while partaking of the more earthly and modern attractions of its innumerable beach resorts and duty-free malls (Ismail 75, Larsen 86, Hijjas 249). Despite its graphic depiction of mob violence and brutality, and perhaps even because of it, the legend retains its hold on the collective memory of many Malaysians. As a cultural product that forms part of the intangible heritage of the nation, the legend of *Mahsuri* is widely regarded as reflecting the feudalistic social order and patriarchal values of Malay communal life of the eighteenth century in which the story is set, and continues to be taught in national schools and anthologized in local folktale collections as part of the cultivated literature for children and young adults in Malaysia. [7]

In acknowledging the subversive power of the folktale, especially in its ability to examine and challenge the ideological position of the Malay woman as constructed by the nation-state, this essay argues that the legendary story of *Mahsuri*, and its subsequent adaptations, can provide important insights into the contemporary relevance of the folktale to the propagation and contestation of patriarchal, feudalistic, and nationalistic ideology of modern, multicultural Malaysia. This essay thus examines two contemporary textual representations of the legendary tale of *Mahsuri* – Lee Su Ann's young adult murder mystery, *The Curse* (2005), and Preeta Samarasan's short story of interracial love, "Mahsuri" (2011) – in order to illustrate how each of these "subversive" literary texts draws attention to the subjugated status of women in contemporary Malay society. Through the exploration of the dynamics of patriarchal oppression, and in the case of Samarasan's text, the additional complexities of racial marginalization in Malaysia, the stories foreground the struggle for power and possession over the body of the idealized Malay woman, represented by the character of "Mahsuri" in both stories. In doing so, both adaptations of the legendary tale reflect the critical engagement with, and interrogation of, issues of gender, racial, and religious identity in contemporary multicultural

Malaysia through their mutual emphasis on the repercussions of Mahsuri's "curse" on their respective protagonists.

Agency in adversity: Lee Su Ann's *The Curse*

The selection of *The Curse* as the prescribed text for the literature component of the Form Five English Language paper of the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia examination affirmed its status as a work of Malaysian young adult (YA) fiction. While it ostensibly revisits the original legend in its treatment of the plot, setting, and major themes, Lee's novel distinguishes itself through its use of the murder mystery genre, and in its depiction of a compelling "feminist protagonist", the university student Azreen, who returns home to her village in Langkawi from her studies in England to unravel the mystery that shrouds her sister Madhuri's sudden death under suspicious circumstances. As Roberta Trites states, a defining trait of the feminist children's (and by implication YA) novel is where the protagonist's "agency, individuality, choice, and nonconformity are affirmed and even celebrated", and are used to reverse traditional gender roles in the story (6). John Stephens notes a similar impetus in adolescent fiction, in which the narrative focus on the protagonist's maturation or personal growth is dependent on the ability to "express self-recognition and agency" (5). The main character's recognition of her agency and voice thus leads to some sort of "transcendence, usually taking the form of a triumph over whatever stricture or system was repressing her" (Trites 7). The narrative of self-discovery that underlies the novel also enables us to consider the text as an example of what Rita Felski terms the "feminist Bildungsroman" (133), with its "concern with questions of identity and autonomous selfhood" as well as a plot that marks a journey from "alienation and lack, to self-knowledge and a potential for self-determination" (150).

Indeed, *The Curse* reflects all of the progressive qualities of adolescent fiction in the author's development of Azreen's character as she journeys toward independence and self-awareness. As an intelligent young girl who yearns to overcome her life of rural poverty, she relishes her freedom as a student in London, and while grateful to be given the opportunity to leave her tiny village to study abroad through the generous sponsorship of her wealthy adopted parents Datuk Zulkifli and Datin Sharifah, Azreen also works hard to improve her circumstances. In contrast to her beautiful, conservative older sister Madhuri who conforms more traditionally to the role of the submissive wife and daughter, Azreen is perceived by her family and the village community as rebellious, "fiery-tempered", tomboyish, and too outspoken and stubborn for her own good. They regard her as a "trouble maker", criticize her interest in hockey and her inclination to hang out with boys, laughing "like a bunch of hyenas", and her general disinterest in being "socially accepted" by those she doesn't much care for (Lee 38). As she declares to her friend, the Old Lady of the forest, when the latter admonishes her for not behaving "in a more feminine manner": "[If] it meant having to obey everything a man asks of me

without a chance of voicing my opinion, I think I'd rather stay *un*feminine my whole life!" (68, emphasis in original). Her defiance of patriarchal rule is epitomized in the strained relationship between Azreen and her stern and disapproving father Saleh, who frequently compares her to the more docile and accommodating Madhuri, a bond which deteriorates even further after the death of both Madhuri and her mother.

However, it is also Azreen's courage, persistence, and nonconformity to societal expectations that enable her to stay true to herself, and to disregard the judgment of others in order to remain strong in the face of personal obstacles: her defense of her good friend Asraf, whom she loyally protects when he is accused of negligence by his employer; her decision to befriend and remain close to the Old Lady of the forest, whom all the villagers treat as a witch and an outcast, but who in fact killed her abusive husband in self-defence; her ability to forgive her emotionally distant and authoritarian father when she realises that it was he who had accidentally killed Madhuri in a fit of anger when he discovers her secret affair with Asraf; and her decision to return to England to continue her studies despite having lost her entire family. The story does portray a range of women mired in stereotypically gendered roles — Normala, the village gossip and rumour-monger; Fatihah, the first wife of Madhuri's husband, Hj. Ghani, who is consumed by jealousy and hatred for Madhuri; Azreen's weak and docile mother whose mental fragility is compounded by her physical disability (she is paralysed after an accident, and also stricken with Alzheimer's disease), and of course the angelic Madhuri herself, whose beauty, piety, and melodious voice enchant all the men in the village, but is powerless to decide who she wishes to marry. All these women, however, serve as foils that only reinforce the strength and agency of a female character like Azreen. As Trites observes of the feminist novel and its revisionary ideology, "[I]t is only against the passive female, the silent female, the objectified female, that the feminist protagonist's achievements can be fully understood" (6).

If the legend of *Mahsuri* illustrates how her curse functions as a form of resistance in the face of limited agency and serves as a potent response to the threat and infliction of male violence or hypermasculinity (what Khoo Gaik Cheng has termed the performance of "authentic masculinity in crisis" 20) , then Lee's novel also critiques the destructive impact of such competitive displays of "masculine" power through the depiction of male characters like Madhuri's father Saleh, her secret lover Asraf, and her husband Hj. Ghani. It is after all the selfish actions and machinations of these three men combined, all of whom are guilty of objectifying, victimizing, and silencing Madhuri to some extent or the other, that culminate in her eventual death. Saleh for instance, agrees to Hj. Ghani's proposal of taking Madhuri as his second wife without giving his daughter the opportunity to raise any objections, believing that the wealthy village headman will provide her with a better life than the one he can afford as a poor farmer; in a fit of rage he also ends up murdering Madhuri (albeit accidentally) upon discovering her and Asraf together at the rubber plantation, perceiving their affair as a blemish on his honor. Likewise, the cowardly and insecure Asraf watches Madhuri married off to a far older man despite his being in love with her. Unable or unwilling to make his intentions known by officially asking

for her hand, he keeps their affair a secret rather than suggesting that Madhuri leave her husband so that they can be together instead. Asraf's display of hypermasculinity, leading the mob on a rampage towards the Old Lady's hut with a torch in hand in the middle of the night ("loss and anguish fuelled his actions") to seek justice for what he believes is the Old Lady's role in his grandmother's death, is also shown to be a clear moment of weakness based on injured pride and the misguided belief in rumor and superstition, one that resolves nothing but only results in the tragic death of the Old Lady, and almost causes Azreen's death as well. Finally, Madhuri's husband, Hj. Ghani, whose wealth and position as the village headman enable him to possess her as a status symbol through the means of a polygamous marriage endorsed implicitly by religious law, reflects the masculine display of feudalistic "might makes right", common in a social order where powerful men can "win women as prizes and social prestige" (Zipes 8), and where women function symbolically as "trophies, (or) indicators of the hero's success" (Hourihan 199). Despite his grief in having lost Madhuri, Hj. Ghani's anxiety over the public revelation of his wife's affair with Asraf, and his insecurity over the prospect of "being laughed at for not being capable of keeping such a pretty young bride happy" causes him to conspire with his men to keep the circumstances of her death a secret and Madhuri thus forever silenced (217).

Like the thorn alluded to in Madhuri's name[8], Lee's reincarnation of Mahsuri in the novel suggests that as beautiful and desirable as Madhuri was, it is the fear of her sexuality and the desire to possess or assert control over her (sexualized) body that proves to be the prickly underlying issue that afflicts, and ultimately destroys, all three men as a result of their own fragile egos. The novel thus enacts what Khoo, citing Butler's theorizing of "gender trouble", describes as "a fantasy construct inscribed on the surface of bodies" (163). Alluding to Butler's concept of gender as performance, Khoo's definition of hypermasculinity as a form of "gender panic" which manifests itself as male violence and is derived from "the discursive authentic male's inability to cope with modern changes to gender roles and relationships" can thus be seen in the destructive actions of Madhuri's father, husband, and lover as they each attempt to deal with their own inadequacies in the face of what they perceive as "uncontrolled and uncontrollable feminine desires" (20).

Lee's adaptation of the legend of *Mahsuri* in the novel thus raises interesting points of contemplation for its young adult audience through the portrayal of the heroine Azreen as a "feminist protagonist" who manages to transcend the family curse and, by implication, the patriarchal strictures that confine her as a young Malay woman. It may seem ironic that despite its prominence in the title of the novel, Mahsuri/Madhuri's curse does not find actual expression in the novel. It is only alluded to briefly in Normala's gossip-fuelled claims as she speculates over the cause and circumstances of Madhuri's death, and yet is shown as capable of causing strife, death, and destruction, bringing natural disasters, and damaging the communal bonds among the villagers. In re-visioning the tale of the wronged maiden of Langkawi, Lee's novel suggests that the wrongful belief in the presence of a curse can be as potent and destructive as the curse itself. By the same

token, the refusal to believe in its power can be a means of releasing oneself from its oppressive grip. Although Azreen appears to have been cursed, having endured the deaths of all her loved ones in the span of a year (her sister, her mother, her beloved friend and source of emotional support, the Old Lady, and finally, her father), her refusal to let her past tarnish her future is a mark of her transcendence and agency as a feminist protagonist. Moving the story beyond the traditional morality tale and the thematic emphasis on injustice and vengeance associated with the original legend, Lee's novel foregrounds instead the protagonist's personal growth and maturation, a central tenet of adolescent fiction. Thus, the ending of the novel optimistically depicts Azreen basking in the natural beauty of autumnal London after completing her statistics exam, contemplating her future, and possibly with a new romantic interest in the form of her college friend, Julian Ng. Cleansed of the sins of the past, and with no "baggage" or liabilities to hold her back, she is now free to forge her own path in life, and to seek or create her own happiness.

"Howling about honour and shame": Preeta Samarasan's "Mahsuri"

Samarasan's reimagining of the *Mahsuri* legend in her eponymous short story is presented as a blighted interracial romance between a married Malay woman, Mahsuri, and an Indian man, Dharma (instead of Deramang, the itinerant *penglipur lara* – "the soother of cares"[9]). The story is told from the perspective of Dharma ("a good boy, polite, hardworking, gives his mother five hundred ringgit every month"), the heroic knight in shining armour to Mahsuri's damsel in distress, who soothes her cares by offering her friendship and performing various acts of kindness for her as she tries to adjust to the challenges of city life. As the idealized Malay woman, Mahsuri is described as "a simple kampung girl, like from a P. Ramlee movie, sopan santun, lemah lembut, face also like a 1960s poster" (76). Although Dharma and Mahsuri begin as friends and colleagues, their relationship deepens when she discovers that her husband, who is away working in the Middle East, has been having an affair with another woman. As Mahsuri turns increasingly to Dharma for comfort and companionship, this causes the rivalry between Dharma and her manipulative, bullying brother to intensify: "If her brother had not been so useless I'm sure she would have asked him, but he gave her extra headache only, good for nothing bastard, so who can blame her for turning to me?" (77). Unable to obtain money from Mahsuri to support his drug habit, her brother insults her by attacking Dharma, and accuses them of having committed adultery: "Don't think I don't know that you're fooling around with that keling mabuk todi! Isn't he paying you properly for what you're giving him?" (82). The accusation is unjustified however. As Dharma maintains, they were close and in love, but their relationship "did not include the act of adultery," for he was "an honourable man" (a virtue alluded to in his own name) and "she too knew what was right and what was wrong" (81). Their plans to marry are tragically thwarted as the story ends with Dharma describing how Mahsuri's brother, in a drug-induced rage, steals from her and ends up stabbing her with a knife, but

defends his actions in the following manner: "In court he looked straight at their faces and said, I did it to protect my family's honour. I did it because my married sister was going with a non-Muslim and I couldn't bear to see it" (83). To Dharma, the punishment that her brother receives for committing this heinous crime does not befit the unforgivable injustice of Mahsuri's senseless murder, and his insurmountable grief in having lost his beloved Mahsuri forever: "…even all their suffering put together will not be enough to satisfy me" (84).

As Samarasan states, her aim in retelling the story of Mahsuri was motivated by the attempt to address the following questions:

> How do you tell a contemporary story about female sexuality and female power (and the patriarchal fear of female sexuality and power) without addressing race and religion? Sexuality in Malaysia cannot be separated from race and religion. Who gets to have sex with whom, who gets to have sex at all, what it means to be a good girl: all these depend on which boxes have been ticked for you on official forms. (85)

Indeed, the intricacies of issues of gender, race, and religion, as they are lived and experienced in multicultural Malaysia, and how they are constructed, linked, as well as contested in the story through the romance between Mahsuri and Dharma, are intimated from the opening lines of the story, where Mahsuri warns Dharma of the very real risk of being beaten up should her brother find out about their relationship:

> We have to berhati-hati because of my brother. He's the dangerous type. He and his friends. Dadah or what I don't know, but they're a rough crowd. He whacked up a boy at our school once because he thought the boy was fresh with me. *And you, not Malay some more*. *He'll go crazy if he finds out*. (75, emphasis mine)

Through this dramatic introduction, as well as in other parts of the skillfully developed plot, Samarasan brings her readers straight to the heart of the story, familiar in its rendering of a recognizable theme: the male fear of female sexuality, and the brutal display of male violence as a means to possess, control, or regulate this sexuality through the dubious means of upholding "family honor". Much like the original version of the legend and Lee's novel, *The Curse*, "Mahsuri" reflects the power struggle between two men who attempt to assert their masculinity over the sexualized body of the idealized Malay woman. Compared to Lee's feminist portrayal of Azreen in *The Curse*, Samarasan's Mahsuri appears more stereotypically gendered and less empowered. Yet her economic independence (she works and supports both her aged mother and her jobless

older brother), her choice to begin a romance with Dharma, and her decision to remain in the relationship despite the risk of her brother's wrath, demonstrate courage and self-determination. Thus, despite the idealized image that Dharma paints of her, Mahsuri's role in the story as a transgressive modern Malay woman who challenges traditional notions of race and gender cannot be overlooked. Tragically, she pays the ultimate price for her self-assertion in death.

The story is also particularly revisionary in the way it draws attention to the intricate complexities of race and religion as factors that inhibit true integration among Malaysians, one that calls into question the perpetuation of a nationalist state ideology through the image of a diverse, multicultural Malaysia reflected in glossy tourism brochures. Mahsuri's brother is depicted as a belligerent, abusive, manipulative drug addict who has no qualms beating up his own father and sister, and his sense of entitlement over Mahsuri is buttressed not only by his dominant status as her older brother (their father has died, hence he regards himself as the family patriarch and her protector, as endorsed by Islamic law), but also by his superiority complex over Dharma as a man from a marginalized minority race. His use of racial slurs like "keling mabuk todi" (alcoholic Indian) to belittle Dharma and his insistence that the latter is sexually exploiting his sister reflect an inherent racism that in fact belies his fear and insecurity over losing Mahsuri as a convenient source of financial support, one that is masked by his claims of protecting family honor.

Despite the beauty and innocence of the couple's "color-blind" relationship, the fear and distrust of the racialised Other also appears among Dharma's family members. His cousins tease him over his choice of a Malay girlfriend ("why a Naatukari?" [10]), while his mother, concerned over his blossoming romance with Mahsuri, declares, "Aiyo Dharma, not a Malay girl of all things. Even Chinese would be okay, but not Malay, please!" Embedded in this remark lies her fears over the loss of her son to the Muslim Mahsuri, the subsequent erasure of his ethnic, cultural, and religious identity, and even the dissolution of their family ties:

> My mother was already thinking about conversion, about marriage, about all those terrible stories you hear nowadays: converted sons not wanting to eat what comes out of their own mother's kitchens, not being allowed to attend their non-Muslim parents' funerals, daughters-in-law keeping the grandchildren far far away from non-Muslim grandparents. (80)

Through the author's attention to such details, the story gives voice to the realities and challenges of interracial marriages in Malaysia, especially those between majority Malay Muslims and non-Muslims, implying that love and romance alone often cannot sustain such marriages — there needs to be a concerted effort by both families to be inclusive, and to treat and respect each other as equals, as well as a community support system, for true harmony to exist and flourish between the races.

Furthermore, in emphasizing how Mahsuri's death is in fact not just the fault of her brother, but also the collective responsibility of the entire community, the story raises the issue of the elusiveness of gender equality in Malaysia, in the face of the lack of morality among its citizens, and the lack of political will to address such imbalances of power between men and women in its administration through the implementation and enforcement of proper policies and legislation. For as long as there are abusive men like Mahsuri's brother "howling about honour and shame" yet getting away with (literal) murder, and neighbours who would judge and gossip about Mahsuri and her misfortunes rather than listen and lend a helping hand, Malaysia's nationalist project of modernity aligned with ideas of gender equality will remain at best, lip service, and at worst, a pipe dream. Reflecting with bitterness on how Mahsuri's murder could have been prevented, Dharma declares:

> You think even one of them [Mahsuri's neighbours] came forward to talk to her, to listen to her side of the story, to find out the truth? Hah. No need to answer also.
>
> That is why I blame those bastard neighbours just as much as I blame him [her brother] and his friends. That is why I say her blood is on their hands also. At least he had dadah for an excuse. […] But they, what excuse did they have for sitting and watching the whole thing while eating kuaci like as if it was a TV drama for their own personal entertainment? Later on of course they said they didn't hear anything that night. No, no, nothing. All of them looked at the police like angels. (83)

In attacking Mahsuri's neighbours for their hypocrisy and moral cowardice, and likening their emotional detachment over her death to a form of grotesque amusement, Dharma's comment also alludes to the public spectacle of Mahsuri's execution in the original legend, in which the villagers fall prey to rumour-mongering, and as such, are punished for seven generations for their lack of discretion. Centuries may have passed, but human nature remains disappointingly consistent in its subscription to herd mentality. As Dharma muses, "But of course people started to talk. What else do they know in this country? They cannot fix the politicians or the price of fish in the market so they console themselves by gossiping from morning to night. It is the pastime of the impotent" (77). Furthermore, the narrator's direct engagement with the reader through the discomforting, intermittent questions that pepper his story, "Are you telling me I should not have helped her at all?" (77); "And you, who do you think was right?" (81); "And whose side do you think they were on?" (84), not only heightens the confessional tone of the text but also serves to remind all readers that they too bear a collective guilt in the death of this innocent young woman.

The story also critiques the public shaming of women as a means of punishment, implying that the policing of women's bodies through the exploitation of ideas of "honor and shame" and how these claim to serve "to teach women all those important lessons" (84) is a method both archaic and morally repulsive. The visual spectacle of the public execution is not only a form of double victimization that strips women (and humans in general) of their dignity and humanity, but also reflects the cruelty and inhumanity of those inflicting and witnessing such judgments. Partaking in the suffering of the innocent, even if vicariously, and especially through the cowardly mask of anonymity, invites the risk of misfortune and calamity, and is a message for the general public worth remembering even in this digital age, regardless of age.

In this regard, Samarasan's retelling of the tale of *Mahsuri* has more than "captured the spirit of the original version," in that it "more effectively conveys to a contemporary audience the moral questions of the original" (85). Updated and reconfigured as a tragic love story of modern multicultural Malaysia, the appeal of "Mahsuri" as a work of young adult fiction lies in its immense potential for debate and discussion on notions of gender, race, and religion, and also in its sensitive exploration of the possibility of fulfilling "the Malaysian dream of a real multicultural society through the overcoming of ethnic barriers" (Khoo 17). As the thwarted interracial romance between Mahsuri and Dharma seems to imply, however, much remains to be done before this beautiful dream can become a reality. For as long as the struggle for economic and political power continues to plague its citizens, and mutual trust, respect, and understanding among the various races are not nurtured and protected, our nation will be at risk of regressing into instability, insularity, and isolation — the curse of modern Malaysia in its reckless pursuit of progress and prosperity.

Conclusion

As contemporary reappropriations of the legend of *Mahsuri* and representative works of young adult fiction, both Lee Su Ann's *The Curse* and Preeta Samarasan's "Mahsuri" illustrate and enhance the subversive potential of the folktale for the contestation of patriarchal, feudalistic, and nationalistic ideology in modern, multicultural Malaysia in illuminating ways. Through critical engagement with nationalist ideologies of gender, racial, and religious identity, both texts offer significant insights into the status of the young Malay woman in contemporary Malaysia through the depiction of their female protagonists, as each struggles to resist or overcome the remnants of traditional Malay feudalistic society through acts of agency and self-assertion. While Lee's protagonist Azreen transcends the limitations of her marginalized position as an economically disadvantaged young woman from a rural background through the firm belief in the emancipatory power of education, she is only able to do so at the expense of losing all her family members, and by extricating and distancing herself from her communal past. Additionally, Lee's decision to conclude the story with Azreen contemplating her future in London suggests an implicit indictment of the restrictive gender roles imposed

upon the protagonist by Malaysian society, since the broadening of her horizons (both intellectually and psychologically) is only made possible through leaving her provincial home and the ghosts of her past behind. Significantly, Azreen's success is also built on the love and acceptance of two significant women that serve as her mentors and role models, who guide and support her in her journey of personal growth — the wealthy Datin Sharifah, who sponsors her studies in England and regards her as her own daughter, and the Old Lady in the forest, with her impressive knowledge of traditional methods of healing, who offers her advice, comfort, and emotional support (which she lacks at home) in dealing with the tumultuous challenges of young adulthood.

In comparison, Samarasan's Mahsuri, while financially independent, is less fortunate. Transplanted from the village to the city, this definitive "good girl" finds herself trapped in a loveless marriage, and copes with loneliness, abandonment, fear, and isolation by seeking refuge in the arms of Dharma, the one man who showers her with kindness and support in a cold and hostile environment. Despite her attempts to chart her own path to "self-recognition and agency", without an adequate support system for surviving the brutal realities of city life, as well as the strength and resilience to resist the destructive forces of gossip and the toxic masculinity of her violently abusive brother, Mahsuri eventually succumbs to the forces of patriarchal oppression and slips through the cracks, dismissed and forgotten by all but Dharma, who remains haunted by grief and the memory of their love.

An appreciation of the subversive qualities of these two textual adaptations of the tale of *Mahsuri*, however, can only be made possible through the acknowledgment of the same aspect present in the original version of the tale. As an example of how folktales, through the use of magic and the supernatural, are often linked to the "wish-fulfilment and utopian projections of the people" (Zipes 8), the tale of *Mahsuri* distinguishes itself through its emphasis on the power of the female curse, reminding its readers "of how the unjust murder of an innocent calls down destruction on the state" (Hijjas 249). Like the tales of the *penglipur lara* of Malay literary tradition, skilled raconteurs who were capable of enthralling their audiences with representations and reinterpretations of popular and well-known tales, the two textual adaptations of the *Mahsuri* legend discussed in this essay demonstrate the ease with which such folktales lend themselves to contemporary political appropriations, breathing life into the original through strong character development and the amplification of familiar themes, and interweaving the old with the new.

As Tatar reminds us, "fairy tales can still be told and retold so that they challenge and resist, rather than simply reproduce, the constructs of a culture" (237). Indeed, textual adaptations like those by Lee and Samarasan demonstrate the possibility of transforming canonical texts like the original legend of *Mahsuri* into "tales that empower and entertain children [and by implication, young adults] at the same time that they interrogate and take the measure of their own participation in a project to socialize the child" (237). Likewise, such stories also enable children and adolescents to "satisfy the urge to experiment with gender (and other

forms of identity) without the need to destabilize their real-life identities" (Simons 157). While the "reinvention through intervention" approach that Tatar recommends concedes to the coercive nature of the "adult agenda" in these texts, it also acknowledges the young reader's power, and provides opportunities for both parties to engage in a "joint interpretive effort" to "create a new story based on the old" (236).

Such strategies are particularly important in view of the challenges that threaten to erode the reading habit among young Malaysians, especially those posed by internet and social media usage. A recent survey[11] involving 16,182 parents and guardians of Malaysian children aged 5-17 revealed particularly unsettling findings related to the reading habit of teenagers (those in the 13-17 age group): compared to younger children, teenagers were least likely to engage in reading books for pleasure, preferring instead to spend their leisure time on digital devices indulging in video streaming and social media; the internet also served as their main source of information and reading material (as opposed to physical, or even e-books), with 38% of teenagers spending as much as five hours a day on their gadgets, rather than reading physical books or participating in sports. Reading for academic purposes was also perceived as more important than reading for leisure or to cultivate the imagination, raising concerns over the negative implications of internet usage on the culture of reading among young Malaysians in general, both now and in the future.

In light of such concerns and in the face of globalization, rapid modernization, and technological advancement, the role of producers of children's literature and young adult fiction in Malaysia is even more crucial in engaging the attention of young readers in order to address their lack of interest in reading books for leisure. As a relatively young nation at the crossroads of tradition and modernity, Malaysia and its literary scene provide fertile ground for exploring the vast potential in catering to a young audience eager to understand its place in the world. The dynamic growth of children's and YA fiction genre, given the volume, diversity, and availability of works currently produced by local writers and publishing houses, are heartening signs of progress. More, however, remains to be done in order to transform the wealth of local canonical materials and classics into tales that both "empower and entertain" their target audience. Just as "each age creates its own folklore through re-readings as well as retellings" (Tatar 230), as this essay hopes to have shown, adaptations of folktales (whether as literary texts, films, or other forms of media) are essential to their survival, for it is precisely such spirited re-imaginings that will keep the Malaysian folktale alive, dynamic, and relevant for generations to come.

Notes

1 See Lurie (20-21); Cashdan (7-8); Haase (10-13); and Jones (18).

2 As evidence of how such didacticism continues to pervade children's literature, Melinda Greenblatt notes that in developing countries like Kenya, "books were not purchased for children unless they were thought to

be educational". Acknowledging the influence of economic forces on the choice of reading material for children, she states that "if you could find parents who had the funds to purchase children's books, you had to market them as educational materials" (Tomlinson 40). From 1975-1988, Greenblatt was the director of the U.S. Committee for UNICEF's Information Center on Children's Cultures in New York, where she oversaw one of the more extensive collections of international children's books, focusing on books from developing countries.

3 For more on the feminist fairy tale as a literary genre and contemporary feminist fiction for children, see Zipes, *Don't Bet on the Prince* (14); Cosslett (82-84); Trite (1-9); Pinsent (84-87); and Haase (14-21).

4 *Puteri Santubong*, a legend from Sarawak, tells of two sisters, Santubong and Sejinjang, who are sent down to Earth by their father, the King of Kayangan (fairyland), to end the feud between the villagers of Pasir Putih and Pasir Kuning. They are warned not to fight with each other, or to be influenced by human folly. Conflict arises when both fall for Prince Serapi, a mortal. Unable to decide whom to wed, he proposes to both, leading to a bitter quarrel between the sisters. Such selfishness and lack of filial piety incur the wrath of the King, who punishes both daughters by turning them into two mountains, Mount Santubong and Mount Sejinjang, which dominate the landscape of Sarawak until today. Like *Puteri Santubong*, the tale of *Bawang Merah, Bawang Putih* highlights the theme of female rivalry over a man, first between the wicked Mak Kundur and the kindly Mak Labu for their husband Pak Ali, and then between their two daughters, Bawang Merah and Bawang Putih for the Sultan's hand in marriage. Upon the death of both her parents, the virtuous Bawang Merah, like Cinderella, endures abuse from both her stepmother and stepsister, but is later rewarded for her sufferings through a singular power (her alluring voice) which gains her the notice and affections of the Sultan. Through the distinct oppositional qualities between Bawang Merah and Bawang Putih, the tale reproduces a familiar trope that reinforces the subsidiary role of women in a patriarchal society, by suggesting that female desirability lies in the balance between sacrifice and the stoic display of virtue in the face of injustice and oppression.

5 An asymmetrical dagger, traditionally made of iron, nickel and several alloys, and famous for its distinctive wavy blade. In some versions of the legend, Mahsuri is executed through even more gruesome means, by being impaled from the anus to the stomach ("hukum sula" in Malay). See Hijjas (248).

6 Translated as "a plain where the castor oil plant grows and where the turtle doves dwell; a typically desolate place", in R.J. Wilkinson (1903), *A Malay English Dictionary*, Kelly & Walsh Ltd., Singapore (444) and cited in Hijjas (248).

[7] For a more comprehensive and contextual discussion of folktales, myths, and legends in the canon of Malaysian children's literature, see Osman, Lai and Kassim (2018:410-420).

[8] From the Malay "duri" which means thorn.

[9] Translated as "the soother of cares", "penglipur lara" was a term used to describe the oral story-teller whose trade it was to entertain the village folk with marvelous tales. Md. Taib Osman cites Sir Hugh Clifford who describes the role of such storytellers in the traditional Malay village: "Such minstrels are greatly loved by the villagers, who hold them in high honour, giving them hearty welcome, and the name by which they are known in the vernacular bears witness to the joy which they bring with them withersoever they go." See Osman (1984: 137-138).

[10] Translated as "people of the land," a common term used in the Tamil language to refer to the Malays.

[11] Findings of the survey were published by E-Sentral, a Malaysian online bookstore, in April 2018 in conjunction with World Book Day. The article which reports these findings, "Internet beri kesan negatif budaya membaca" was published in *Berita Harian* on 1 May 2018. https://www.pressreader.com/malaysia/berita-harian5831/20180501/283953178195607, accessed 26 October 2018.

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