

Muhammad Haji Salleh, *Hang Tuah Di Lautan Ceritera*. Pulau Pinang: Penerbit Universiti Sains Malaysia, 2020, 158 pp. ISBN 978-967-461-546-8.



Hang Tuah, the feudal Malay warrior from Melaka whose stories travel through oral tales, pages of history books, animation, and motion pictures has gone through innumerable interpretations. Commentators either elevate him to the status of an unsung hero or emasculate him for his ‘blind obedience’ to his King. After so many centuries, Hang Tuah is still celebrated as a conspicuous Malay personage who represents the relentless Malay spirit, absolute optimism, and faith. *Hang Tuah di Lautan Ceritera* (The Oceanic Chronicles of Hang Tuah) transports its readers into the ancient Malay world through the passage of time, as Muhammad Haji Salleh (1942-) reveals the answer to the question: *Who is Hang Tuah?*

The book is a collection of essays that span forty years to deconstruct the elusive Malay warrior, Hang Tuah. It represents the writer’s quest and sustained effort to realign the chronology of Hang Tuah across eight chapters. The writer explores Hang Tuah’s lineage, roots, and origin by exploring various sources, including oral storytelling, personal expedition, and manuscripts such as the Malay Annals and *Hikayat Hang Tuah* (Tales of Hang Tuah). The essays not only reveal the identity of Hang Tuah and his complex relationships with his comrade Hang Jebat and the Malay Palace, but also reflect the writer’s admiration for this

Malay warrior and his aggravated view of the current state of mind of the Malays whom he found to be timid and yielding.

After extensive research, Haji Salleh affirms that Hang Tuah was originated from the ethnic *Orang Laut Riau* (Riau Sea People) and was born in Sungai Duyung, Singkep. The writer narrates that from a young age Hang Tuah had shown that he was indeed a man of extraordinary means. His immaculate skills in weapons-handling foregrounded his distinguished characteristics as a valiant warrior. He was said to be invincible and armed with the knowledge of ancient Malay mysticism which enabled him to ‘read’ the mind and intentions of his enemies. His physical strength was complemented by intellectuality and knowledge of war tactics and strategies.

In the chapter “The Oral Tales of Hang Tuah”, the writer shows that Hang Tuah was not only a legendary character but an archetypal Malay hero. His humility preceded his reputation. He was identified to be a selfless knight who went “beyond call of duty.” Zainal Kling asserts that, based on oral history, Hang Tuah was an articulate man with strong personality, “courageous, extremely loyal to his King against whom he did not hold any brewing grudges” (29). Hang Tuah is also said to be “an early cosmopolitan man, a polyglot and a man who transcended culture and international borders” (37).

In the chapter “Dialoguing a Warrior and Contesting the Hidden Words”, the psyche of Hang Tuah and that of his companion Hang Jebat are problematised and deconstructed. The writer claims that Hang Jebat was Hang Tuah’s “*bayangan jiwa*” or “alter-ego” (51). These two contrasting figures mirrored Freud’s psychoanalytic Superego and id. Parnickel identifies Hang Tuah as the epic hero and Hang Jebat, as the “epic traitor” (403). As a hero, Hang Tuah was a kind and selfless man who was “infinitely perfect, too good in himself to be eclipsed by any character at all” (Haji Salleh 85). His patriotism, bravery, and stewardship were directed to serve his Sultan and the state of Melaka, and on a personal level, he was said to be more reserved, which perhaps explained why he did not rebel when he was wronged by the envious courtiers. Hang Tuah’s submissiveness is said to be attuned to the “customs and traditional Malay court society” (Kratz 72). On the contrary, Hang Jebat the “epic traitor” is portrayed as a classic antagonist, a foil to Hang Tuah. In comparison to Hang Tuah, he was impulsive, emotional, and garrulous.

Haji Salleh continues dissecting the identity and personality of Hang Tuah as described in the epic tale of *Hikayat Hang Tuah*. This saga teaches the reader “loyalty, equity, boundary, and submission” (51). In his exploration of the tale, the writer proclaims that Hang Tuah’s virtuosity and splendour were elevated to a great height as he was the only Malay protagonist who had transcended the space of “pantheon, regal, international, spiritual inner self and nature” (97). The tale also reveals Hang Tuah’s and Hang Jebat’s synergetic relationship. As opposed to Hang Tuah’s archetypal personality, the tale also narrates Hang

Jebat's notorious treason against the Sultan of Melaka. Haji Salleh argues that Hang Jebat had lived within Hang Tuah's sub-conscious mind. Hang Jebat's treason against the Sultan is thought to be a manifestation of Hang Tuah's dissidence against the corrupted system which had wrongly persecuted him to death sentence based upon a malicious slander. The writer affirms that Hang Jebat's betrayal of the Palace signifies a compelling message that "obedience must be displayed rationally, while devotion comes with ... astuteness" (51).

The Palace of Melaka Sultanate was a symbol of undisputed authority. Its rulers were placed firmly in a position of authority within the hierarchy of ancient Malay society. The Palace was formal and supreme with its own lavish rituals. The royalty or the elite were "the only prime force in history" which triggered a tension between them and the masses (Maaruf 1). The monarchy is thought to be based on a system of "unequal power which only concerned with the well-being of the royal elites" (Hashim 93). Haji Salleh argues that despite Hang Tuah's altruistic and self-sacrificing service to his Sultan, the Palace saw him as a mere 'slave' whose main duty was to only serve the Sultan at whatever cost. The conflict between the masses and the Palace was intensified during Hang Jebat's rebellion against the Sultan. This act of treason, Haji Salleh asserts, reflects the modern Malays' inner conflict, as they struggle to balance between the acts of humility and submissiveness on the one hand, and arrogance and bluntness on the other.

In another essay "Hang Tuah – The Fractured Psyche of a Race", Haji Salleh draws upon the concept of history re-visioning, as he discusses the reversal of Hang Tuah's and Hang Jebat's portrayal in the present time. Now many argue that Hang Jebat, not Hang Tuah, should be elevated to the position of a hero. The latter's 'blind obedience' is considered an archaic idea that is no longer pertinent from the perspective of today's modern open society.

In the final chapter of this book "Hang Tuah Speaks English", Haji Salleh traces the existence of Hang Tuah amongst international publications. *Hikayat Hang Tuah* gained international acclaim when it was translated into German, Dutch, and Russian. This chapter also registers Haji Salleh's dismay over the lack of interest among current generation in reading Malay canonical literary texts. This has inspired him to translate *Hikayat Hang Tuah* into English as part of his social responsibility to make this tale available to a far wider audience. After almost three decades of meticulous and conscientious effort, the tale was successfully translated into English under the title of *The Epic of Hang Tuah*.

Hang Tuah di Lautan Ceritera is a brilliant work that seeks to establish that Hang Tuah is not a fictitious or mythical character; he was a historical figure who is believed to have lived in the 15th century and played a significant role in transporting Melaka to its golden age. His complex relationship with his 'soul mate' Hang Jebat symbolises the internal turmoil of the present Malays who are constantly in search for their identity and self-worth. Haji Salleh has successfully foregrounded the legendary Hang Tuah in this book by critically appraising his

glorious and humble attributes which the modern Malays should uphold. Even though the cause of Hang Tuah's death and the location of his grave remain unknown, Hang Tuah is already immortalised in the mind and soul of the Malays and many of today's streets are named after him, as a sign of recognition and salutation to his existence in the pages of history.

Note: English translations of all Malay source texts are my own.

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