

Daphne Lee, ed. *Malaysian Tales: Retold & Remixed*. Petaling Jaya: ZI Publications, 2011. 204 pp. ISBN 978-967-5266-20-1.

Many of us grow up on a steady diet of fairy tales; Cinderella, Snow White, Rapunzel and Red Riding Hood are some of the stories that have timeless and universal appeal. Previously read to children, they have now been adapted into television shows and movies. The apparent success of Walt Disney's productions of many of these fairy tales contributes to the immortality and universality of their appeal to people. As Jack Zipes states, "fairy tales continue to pervade if not invade our lives throughout this world" (ix). They are metaphorical stories that stemmed from basic human experiences and contained vital information that strengthened the common bonds of people living in communities. At the surface level, fairy tales are entertaining – stories of magic, lush landscapes, beauty, wealth, blissful marriages. Upon further scrutiny, however, the stories convey the political, social and psychological realities of the real world. They provide exemplars for human conduct and consequently, assign meaning according to communal norms and expectations. Most fairy tales promote strict dichotomies of the good and bad with fixed class hierarchies. With this caveat in mind, Daphne Lee's collection of Malaysian tales contains within them subversions of customs and traditions, social beliefs as well as political affiliations.

Lee was prompted to put together re-creations of Malaysian tales for adult consumption. She said:

The prospect of giving new life and meaning to old local tales was an exciting one. The plan was to present these tales in ways that would make them relevant to current times and modern sensibilities. I was eager to see what Malaysian writers would make of Si Tanggang and Mahsuri, the shenanigans of Sang Kancil, the sighting of the lion that gave Singapore its name, and other stories. How would these tales be interpreted in the context of our current social and political climate? What new settings would be created for them? In what ways would plots and characters be deconstructed and reconstructed? (11)

This collection of sixteen retold and remixed stories is indeed timely. Bookstores in Malaysia have various versions of Western folktales but the local variety is greatly wanting. Lee's collection of Malaysian tales brings together revisions of much-loved stories such as Puteri Saadong, Mahsuri, Batu Belah, Bawang Putih Bawang Merah, Raja Bersiong and Sang Kancil. Each story has its own twist, heavy with meaning. All of them are embedded with

contemporaneous significance. Many of the contributors are well-known writers, adding to the appeal of this compilation.

Among some memorable transformation of folk tales include Puteri Saadong, the jetsetting wife and Abdullah, the house husband; Bawang Puteh Bawang Merah, the loving stepsisters; Batu Belah, a story of androids; Mahsuri, a tale of interracial relationship; Si Tanggang, the story of a mother's loss and regret. These are examples of folk tales made anew. The "revisioning" technique, a terminology popularised by Adrienne Rich, refers to the "act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, entering an old text from a new critical direction" that allows one "to understand the assumptions in which we are drenched" (35). Alicia Ostriker calls this act of writing as "revisionist mythmaking" where she states that "whenever a poet employs a figure or story previously accepted and defined by a culture, the poet is using myth, and the potential is always present that the use will be revisionist: that is, the figure or tale will be appropriated for altered ends, the old vessel filled with new wine, initially satisfying the thirst of the individual poet by ultimately making cultural change possible" (213). This subversive nature of retelling makes up the agenda of Lee's collection.

Some of the more popular tales such as Si Tanggang and Batu Belah, for example, are accounts that prescribe good behaviour. Si Tanggang is the unfilial son who is turned into stone; Batu Belah is the living boulder that swallows the neglected mother. Both these legends instruct children to behave respectfully with their parents and the elderly. Inherent in them, however, is the fear that children will be ungrateful and abandon their parents. In a more sinister interpretation, mothers have latent powers to the extent that they can get God to take their side.

In Lee's *Malaysian Tales*, however, these stories take on different pathways. Karina Bahrin's "A Little Warm Death," a remake of the story of Puteri Sa'adong is one such narrative. Puteri Sa'adong is Sadie, a nomadic woman who possesses "the innate ability to meld herself to her environment" (19), whose work takes her "across the globe" (18). Abdullah, her husband, is unemployed, and when she is away for her work trips, they stay in touch through text messages and communicate via Skype. He wonders if she has affairs during her trips, "his eyes swept her room every time they talked, peeled for the sign of incongruences that could hint at the presence of other men" (20). Unlike the ancient Puteri Sa'adong who became the victim of her husband's betrayal and unleashed her anger by stabbing him with her hairpin (according to the version in *Hikayat Seri Kelantan*), the modern Sadie is non-confrontational. The new Abdullah is exactly like his old namesake, living in his wife's luxurious home, and when his wife is away, he has fun with other women. Sadie, however, is not threatened. Instead, her husband is the one who feels insecure: "He contemplated the possibility of sleeping next to her every night, their lives

entwined in the minutest details. Errands shared and no longer separate. Colds weathered together, perhaps in continuous loops owing to the virulence of germs” (21). Karina transforms Puteri Sa’adong into a woman with flamboyance and agency, dismantling stereotypes about women and rebelling against assumptions that show them as irrational and fragile.

Si Tanggang, Preetta Samarasan’s revision of the story of the ungrateful child is another memorable transformation. Her makeover of the tale is different from Muhammad Haji Salleh’s “Si Tenggara’s Homecoming” where Si Tenggara is given a voice to provide reasons for his changed ways. Samarasan tells the story from the perspective of the grieving mother whose love towards her son is more immense and deeper than the oceans he has chosen over his parents. But this modern mother is wise; she knows the individuality of children, that “from the moment the air scrapes their fresh lungs for the first time they are becoming their own people” (94). She understands the necessity for the child to become his own person and seek his own destiny. She erases our perception of Tanggang as the unkind child, choosing instead to focus on his generosity towards the creatures of the sea, saying “I tell you this to show you that my son had a kind heart, a heart capable of feeling for the lowliest of creatures, because this is the thing that others have left out of our story” (96). While Samarasan keeps to the original tale by showing Tanggang being turned into a stone, she emphasises that “there was never any satisfaction in it for me” (103). Instead of rejoicing that God and nature conspire with her to show Tanggang’s fault, the mother is the “most cursed of all” because she is “condemned to endure everything that stone hearts cannot feel” (103). By making overt her agony and regret, Samarasan emphasises the need for parents to allow their children to make their own choices.

M. SHANmughalingam’s refashioning of Sang Kancil stories in “Trick or Tree” takes on a contemporaneous warning about sustaining the environment. As an NGO who monitors illegal logging, Kamariah the mouse deer ventures deep into the forest, and is well-informed on “money optics” (186) that threaten the ecology of nature. She educates her mother by saying, “Mak, you know what drove not only little us but even the mighty elephants out of the jungle?” (188). She strategises to sabotage “the illegal loggers supply chain” and “help to put them out of business” (189). By turning this story into a tale about conserving the environment, SHANmughalingam highlights Malaysia’s problem with deforestation. As the writer himself confesses, he loves “trees and despairs about illegal logging which betrays the earth’s future for short-term selfish gain for a few” (199). His revision mocks the authorities’ poor surveillance of Malaysian forests and the rife corruption that prevails among those involved in the business.

Many more fascinating transformations abound in Lee's collection. Modern Malaysian writers have appropriated ancient tales and attached new meanings to them; their revisions are symptomatic of subterranean currents below the surface structure of tales of morality that threaten to destroy formulaic ways of seeing things. By shattering the ways in which we have read the original tales, these new stories subvert meanings for alternative values and norms to surface.

Works Cited

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