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An Exploration of the Nayakis (Heroines) in the Malay Classic Films of Dewi Murni, Gul Bakawali and Selendang Delima based on *Natyasastra's Ashtanayika bhavas*

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Abstract

This paper examines the women in the classic Malay movies *Dewi Murni*, *Gul Bakawali* and *Selendang Delima* who are depicted to be resilient, righteous and faithful. Upon analysis, the researcher has concluded that there are no proper Malay theories that can be applied to discuss the image of these Malay heroines (in the films discussed) and as such an interest developed to examine these characters in accordance to the Indian characterisation of heroines found in the *Natyasastra*. The *shastras* have ascertained the basic psychological status of woman, the *Nayaki*, into eight divisions, called *Ashtanayika bhavas*. These divisions portray the heroine in different situations, expressing different feelings, sentiments and reactions. Methods of characterization is used to analyse the female characters in the films stated, focusing on physical description, attitude, inner thoughts, reactions and speech to note on how they emerge from being frail and docile to becoming strong independent women, all within the boundaries set by their respective culture and tradition. Malay women are portrayed as passive, loyal, persevering, accepting, submissive and pure in most Malay literature. The objectives of the study lies in the assertion of the strength and intelligence of the female characters in the films and hopes to establish them as female protagonists who are at par with their male counterparts by examining them through the lenses of *Natyasastra's Ashtanayika bhavas*.

Keywords: *Natyasastra*, Malay Literature, *Ashtanayika Bhavas*.

Objectives

The paper aims to establish that the female characters found in films of this study can be examined based on Indian characterization of heroines. Traditional Malay literature often portrays the women

as individuals who were intellectually, physically and psychologically weak. The female characters are depicted to be incapable beings whose survival depend on the heroes. (Hamdan R: 2014). Although this is so, the Malay Archipelago had more than one woman warrior or queen in its resource of tales. *Hikayat Panji Semarang*, a Malay literature tells the tale of a princess who cross-dresses as a man so she can be a warrior (Mohamed 1992: 1-148). Cik Siti Wan Kembang, a warrior princess enters battlefields with an army of female horse riders. Malay women in classic Malay films are depicted as strong yet enduring and not as suggested by Malay literature that paints them as weak and submissive. The researcher chose to analyse the selected characters in the films concerned to prove this point. As no Malay theories discuss the contributions of female characters in details, the researcher believed that it is only befitting to examine the female characters in the films of study based on Bharata Muni's *Ashtanayika bhavas* found in the *Natyasastra* (24.210-11), a treatise that has profound descriptions of female characterisation. A connectivity is established whereby although the female characters in the Malay films of the study have profound Indian influences, efforts have been made to retain the native culture, in terms of language and clothing. The study aims to ascertain that the female characters in the films portray strength and intelligence and establish themselves as female protagonists who are at par with their male counterparts by examining them through the lenses of *Natyasastra's Ashtanayika bhavas*.

Background

Kalidasa's *Shakuntala* is adapted into the film *Dewi Murni* and this can be established through the identification of sequential events that are similar. The Malay story is transformed and adaptations are made to the original Indian story but prominent differences are notable. The basic story of *Dewi Murni* remains the same whereby the main characters meet in improbable surroundings, court and get married. The kings, Dushyanta and Indraloka lose memory of their wives (in distinct ways), the heroines lose their signet rings and are rejected by their respective husbands at the palace court. In *Dewi Murni* as well as *Shakuntala*, the lost rings are discovered in a fish's maw and upon its re-emergence, the kings' memories of their respective wives are regained. The lovers are reunited after undergoing a painful separation. In 1940, Elias Duncan directed the Tamil film, *Shakuntala* based on the play and V. Shantaram directed a similar film in Hindi in the year 1943 (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen 1994: 185). These movies were produced and released in India during the time that B.S. Rajhans began his directorial debut in this country. The story of *Shakuntala* could have been adapted by Rajhans to suit the psyche of the Malay audience.

Gul Bakawali is the story of a young prince, Tajul Muluk who was exiled by his father (before birth) upon a prediction by a fortune-teller that he (Tajul Muluk) would cause his father to go blind. The prince is raised by his adoptive parents who are woodcutters and upon a chance encounter, he inadvertently becomes the cause behind the king's (his biological father) blindness. Tajul Muluk goes on a quest to recover a magical flower, *Bakawali* to restore the king's eyesight. His succession to the throne and marriage to the *Bakawali* princess forms the rest of the story.

The movie *Selendang Delima* is based on a traditional Malay romantic poem entitled *Syair Selindung Delima* dateable to at least the latter half of the eighteenth century¹. The *syair* is known under interspersing titles such as *Syair Seri Bunian* or *Syair Indera Laksana*. *Hikayat Selindung Delima*

¹Sarah HICKS (SOAS)'s electronic article entitled, *Swinging between traditions: tracing the origins and meanings of narrative motifs in the traditional Malay romantic poem Syair Selindung Delima*, 2006 at http://www.soas.ac.uk/jrc/events/tufs_soas_abstracts/file44618.pdf accessed 25-06-13.

is the title of the *syair* in prose form. The main intrigue of the plot is that of brutality and misery of a young girl at the hands of the king's old wives, and her eventual triumph over her foes and her reunion with her parents.

Dewi Murni of Dewi Murni

Dewi Murni is first introduced as a happy and buoyant village girl. She displays strength and courage portrayed when she dismisses her friends' taunts regarding her life partner by stating (in her song) that that she will never be easily attracted to anyone. Murni who sees Indraloka hunting a deer gathers herself and bravely impedes him from his hunt. Indraloka who is instantly attracted to Murni, charms her with his words, he says that he is heaven and she a nymph. Indraloka's praise is able to calm the angry Murni and so she becomes shy and innocently asks him "*apa itu syurga?*" (What is heaven?).

Murni's question implies that she is truly innocent and not well versed with worldly knowledge. Murni finds herself to be attracted to the king but she conceals her feelings. The king in an attempt to conceal his identity, tells Murni that he is one of the king's hunters. Murni's attraction towards the king is established when she shyly steals a glance at Indraloka as she leaves with her friends. In the next scene, we find a reluctant Murni brought to a garden by the king for a secret meeting; her protests are genuine as she says that it is against her upbringing to be alone with a man. She accepts the king when he is able to convince her of his love. (Indraloka repeatedly tells her that he loves her). Murni is embarrassed when she discovers that her lover is actually the king. She realises her position and feels guilty for not recognising the king.

When the king visits her village she is appropriately hospitable to him and is overjoyed when he asks for her hand in marriage. Dewi Murni is devastated when her uncle refuses to give permission as her father is away. She suffers internally and refuses to eat. When Pak Man gives his consent, Murni is ecstatic as her dream of marrying the king is realised. Murni shows herself to be considerate when she understands that the king needs to leave her behind as he has not obtained her father's permission. During the king's absence, she pines for him and is extremely vulnerable. When her friends tease her that the king must have forgotten her, she becomes offended. The news of her father's return gives her renewed hope and she sets out on the journey to the palace. We find Murni to be in high spirits but her disturbing dream breaks her confidence slightly and puts fear in her heart. As the king rejects her in court, we feel sorry to see her hopes dashed and accused of being insane by the Prime Minister.

Murni's extreme sorrow and humiliation is visible when she leaves the palace tear – stricken. Murni's cowardly act of attempting suicide, after being unable to face her friends upon her return from the court can be attributed to the fact that she is unable to swallow her pride. She had initially claimed that she would not easily fall in love. Murni saved by a hermit goes to live in his hermitage. Murni's extreme sorrow is manifested through her song at the end of the scene. Murni's separation from the king was only for a short duration and so, we are not able to see her growth but instead we feel her anguish. As a new bride, she is cruelly separated from her husband and endures heartache and humiliation. Dewi Murni demonstrates perceptive nature when she accepts the king without any questions and in the end she finds true happiness with the king and has easily adapted to the courtly ways.

Dewi Murni, is initially portrayed as childlike and innocent. In the initial stages we find her to be constantly upset and irritated with her friends as they tease her. As mentioned earlier, in the genre of a movie, there is not much scope to bring out the character of the heroine, as the main purpose of the movie is to narrate the story. The character of Murni is not emphasised and we find that there is less range for emotions except in a few scenes such as when she is rejected by King Indraloka and when she is separated from him.

Dewi Murni represents the *Virahotkanthita nayaki* according to the *Natyasastra* as she is distressed by her separation with her husband (Luiz Martinez 2001: 288-295). She is innocent and is accorded a status in her respective 'home'. She shines in her roles as a daughter, wife and friend. Even in her exile she stays true to her love. She finds an inner source of strength. Dewi Murni holds a power over her lover and her position in the life of King Indraloka is apparent. She is able to make the king pine for her during their period of separation.

Princess Sharizat of *Gul Bakawali*

Princess Sharizat is introduced to us in the opening scene. She who lovingly looks after the *bakawali* plant is prophesied to be married to the person who plucks the flower. Upon hearing the prophecy, Princess Sharizat is overjoyed and her inner most feelings are expressed in a song. Although unaware of future's husband's status and whereabouts, she is shown to be accepting the prophecy as her fate and waits eagerly for the blooming of the flower. As the flower begins to bloom, Princess Sharizat conveys her hopes for a handsome, brave and virtuous husband in a song. Princess Sharizat can be categorised as a *Mudha Vasaksajja Nayaki* based on the *Natyasastra* (Luiz Martinez 2001: 288-295). She dresses up, wears ornaments and waits with expectance and happiness for the arrival of her true love.

As the flower is in full bloom, Princess Sharizat is seen to be anxious and impatiently waiting for her future husband. She shares her thoughts with her maid in waiting. "*hai dayang..bagaimana agaknya paras rupa pemuda itu?*" (Oh! maid, how do you think he will look?) to which the maid answers "*tentulah kakak dan gagah orangnya..kalau tidak bagaimana dia boleh sampai kemari*" (he must be handsome and brave, if not he would not be able to arrive here). Although a princess, Sharizat shows that she is willing to listen to those who are concerned of her. She listens to her maid who advises her not to constantly think of the prince as it may result in her (Sharizat) falling ill. Sharizat admits that amongst all illness, "*sakit asmara*" (lovesick) is the worst a person can be inflicted with.

Sharizat's love and longing is clearly shown when she refuses to retire for the night but instead waits at the garden for the arrival of the prince. The princess is disappointed when she wakes up (Tajul uses magic to ensure that she does not wake up while he plucks the flower) and realises that the flower has been plucked and that she had missed her opportunity to meet her future husband. She is quick to realise that her ring has been stolen by the person who plucked the flower. Sharizat shows wisdom when she questions the genie as to how someone was able to enter the palace while it was on guard.

Although angry with the genie, Sharizat does not punish him but asks him to leave. The princess shows determination when she tells her maid that she will go out and look for the 'thief' "*walaupun bagaimanapun beta akan mencari orang yang mengambil bunga ini*" (no matter what, I will look for the

person who has taken the flower). Princess Sharizat and her maid intelligently disguise as men and go looking for the flower. The princess stops to help Tajul Muluk and Mubarak (they are tied up by Amar and Amir). The princess displays innocence when she immediately agrees to travel with Tajul Muluk and Mubarak although she does not know their true identity.

Sharizat is prompt in explaining to the king that the ring belongs to her and that it cannot be imitated as the stone on the ring can only be found in her garden. Her explanation enables Tajul Muluk to prove that he is the person who has plucked the flower. Sharizat coyly tells the king her name and asks him to grant her request. Sharizat proves her love is true, as she is attracted to Tajul Muluk even before she learns of his identity as a prince. Sharizat patiently waits for Tajul Muluk to cure the king's eyesight before requesting to the king for her to be married to Tajul Muluk. Sharizat is overjoyed when Tajul Muluk agrees to marry her and in the end she is shown to be happily married to Tajul Muluk.

Sharizat is portrayed as a demure princess who devotes her time and attention in ensuring that the mythical bakawali flower blooms in accordance to the oracle. Her character proves that love conquers all. Her patience in waiting for her true love is reciprocated and she attains happiness. She shines as a loyal lover even when she is oblivious to the identity of her future husband. She is also strong and determined in voicing out her intentions and ensuring that her future is secured.

Sri Banian of *Selendang Delima*

Sri Banian fits the characteristics of a heroine according to the *Natyasastra*. She is charming (*lallitha*) noble (*udatta*) and quiet (*nibhrta*) (Rangacharya, 2010). Sri Banian exuberates charm when she is shown to sing happily with her maids in a garden of flowers. Sri Banian is quick to notice that her brother is upset and upon learning that he is to go away, she exhibits childlike innocence when she asks Bang Segara to always remember her when he is away. She shows her obedience to the king when she immediately tells Bang Segara that their father's orders are to be abided at all times when she learns that her brother is acting upon her father's orders. "*kakanda musti turut perintah ayahanda lebih lebih lagi kerana menambah ilmu*". (We must abide by father's wishes especially if it is to enhance our knowledge).

Her obedience is further established as she follows her father's orders (he goes off to hunt the garuda) and keeps herself hidden in a chest until the return of her brother. Sri Banian is portrayed as helpless and dependent as she cries and begs her brother to leave the village as she does not want to be orphaned (he insists on going to hunt down the garuda). This aspect of Sri Banian's character befits the notion that women in Malay court are described as submissive and dependent (Hashim, 2003: 29). Sri Banian's gentle demure and her vulnerable condition add to her character as she is able to influence Banag Segara to leave the village with her.

Sri Banian's beauty and purity is the reason behind Dewa Laksana's obsession her. She is able to attract Dewa Laksana just by her conduct. Her unselfish nature in helping her brother to pull a heavy boat ashore and her compassion towards draws Dewa Laksana's attention towards her. During her encounter with Dewa Laksana, Banian is shown to be accepting of her condition (she is pregnant) and she becomes a dutiful wife who abides by her husband's words. As Dewa Laksana requests her to

hide their child in a chest, Banian does not question his intentions but instead is submissive and follows his instructions.

In order to spare her brother of a heartache, Banian discloses the fact that she is pregnant and that upon delivery of the baby, her spirit is to join Dewa Laksana. Instead she hints to her brother that if anything were to happen to her, he is not to be devastated but instead he has to take the chest along with him. The audience are able to understand the depth of Banian's pain towards the impending separation from her brother. She pretends to be tired and tells Bang Segara that she needs to rest. As she closes the room door, she breaks down and cries bitterly.

Banian's maternal instincts are revealed when she cradles her new born baby and sings a sad lullaby in which she prays for her child's welfare. As the chest opens, we see a reluctant Banian who is split between her love for her baby and her love for Dewa Laksana. Banian tells the baby, Selendang Delima that she loves her and wants to be with her but the gods are calling her "*dewata memanggil ibu*". In a final plea, Banian prays to the Gods that her child is to be protected. Banian's soul then joins Dewa Laksana in the heavens. We come across Sri Banian in the last scenes of the movie when she is liberated from a curse (she was cursed by Dewa Laksana's father and became a stone) by Selendang Delima. Banian and her husband Dewa Laksana return to her kingdom and live happily with Selendang Delima.

As a daughter and a sister, Banian lived a protected life under the care of her father and brother. As a wife and mother, she is love and devotion personified. Sri Banian's enduring character personifies the notion that love and devotion. Sri Banian is childlike, innocent and is depicted as possessing great beauty. She is a princess who possesses innate simplicity and purity in her character. Although this is so, she shines as an example of a true lover who is willing to sacrifice herself for the sake of love and promise. She endures separation from the people she loves for the sake of Dewa Laksana. The researcher personally feels that her character is captivating.

Puteri Bongsu of *Selendang Delima*

Puteri Bongsu is the youngest and the wisest of Bang Segara's seven wives. Her wisdom and knowledge are when she gently reminds her sisters when they enquire about the trunk to always oblige by the king's words and that as a wife, they should never be suspicious of him. Her wisdom and conduct enable her to be crowned as queen usurping her sisters. Puteri Bongsu belongs to the *Swadhinpatika nayaki* of the *Natyasastra*. She is contented with her life as Bang Segara's wife and as such she does not request for any materialistic things from her husband and only hopes for his safety as he leaves to meet his subjects. Her unselfish nature and obedience win the king's heart and we find him to be attracted to her.

Puteri Bongsu is manipulated by her sisters who force her to open the chest. Although she hands them the keys, she does not participate when her sisters open the chest. Puteri Bongsu shows compassion when she shields Selendang Delima and does not allow her to be beaten by her sisters. After getting an assurance that her sisters will not harm the girl, she leaves her with them but immediately questions her own decision "*adakah aku dalam kebenaran atau aku telah buat satu kesalahan*" (have I done the wrong thing). As the king returns and gathers his wives, Puteri Bongsu

chides her sisters for being selfish in wanting the things they had requested from him instead of inquiring about the king's welfare.

Puteri Bongsu bravely admits to opening the chest without the king's permission and that Selendang Delima was discovered in the chest. Dewa Laksana praises Puteri Bongsu by stating that she is compassionate and kind "*berhati kemanusiaan*" when he tells Bang Segara about his other wives (Bang Segara's) mistreatment of Selendang Delima. Puteri Bongsu's character shows that she is honest, loyal and dedicated. She is supportive and understanding and is an exemplary wife.

Findings

Women may have different experiences based on their economic stature, ethnicity, culture and religion but even so, they do share similarities such as living in patriarchal dominated societies. As such, the study has established that the female characters, Dewi Murni, Princess Sharizat, Sri Banian and Puteri Bongsu are indeed women of resilience. Although the women were represented through the lenses of Natyasastra's *Ashtanayika bhavas* namely *Virahotkanthita nayaki*, *Mudha Vasaksajja Nayaki*, *nayaki* and *Swadhinpatika nayaki*, they excel and possess independent spirit that empowers other Malay women. They come across as women with substance as they face adverse situations.

Conclusion

On the whole, the study is able to conclude that upon analysis based on the Natyasastra, the female characters found in the films concerned are portrayed to have strength and resilience as opposed to how Malay women are characterised in Malay literature. As such, this study brings forth the idea that assumptions can be challenged and investigated through different means. The heroines were the total focal point (*asraya*) of the hero's state of love. Murni's perseverance and patience earns her the lost love of Indraloka. Princess Sharizat's belief in true love unites her with Tajul Muluk, Sri Banian's purity reunites her with her family and Puteri Bongsu's wisdom and compassion earns her the status of queen. The women show that inner beauty and virtue are the upmost important qualities that should govern a woman. By analysing the characters based on physical description, attitude, inner thoughts, reactions and speech.

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