Gender on the Agenda: The Story of Hang Li Po Revisited

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Abstract

Reading with "gender on the agenda" is a critical part of the reading and studying of literature and cultural representations. It encourages us to become discerning readers and recognize aspects of the texts and the contexts of their creation and reception which we might not otherwise notice. This paper exemplifies the way in which I interpret the story of Hang Li Po with a gender perspective. Using the version of the story in Sejarah Melayu, I compare Rahmah Bujang's revision of the Chinese princess in her drama Puteri Li Po.

In Sejarah Melayu, Hang Li Po is representative of the type of silent women which pervades the telling of the history of Malay kings. By making her mute, the court scribe conceals her significance in the story. I argue, however, that her story is evidence of the weight Malays place on women as the cementers of alliance. Despite her silence and seeming lack of agency, Hang Li Po is absolutely central to the story because her presence and connection to China alter Melaka's condition from political insecurity to political authority.

I view Rahmah Bujang's revision of the story of Hang Li Po as a challenge to and appropriation of the patriarchal Malay literary canon. Her imaginative construction of the well-known episode involves fundamental shifts in perspective. Thus, the silent Hang Li Po is now imbued with a voice and feelings. By exposing the other side of the female and male experiences, Rahmah questions the stereotypes perpetuated in the Malay court narrative traditions, making modern readers aware that indeed, gender perspective is on the agenda.

Introductory Remarks

In this paper, I compare two stories of Hang Li Po – the original
version in *Sejarah Melayu* and Rahmah Bujang's *Puteri Li Po*. In *Sejarah Melayu*, Hang Li Po is representative of the practice by which female actions and words are filtered through the undeniably male voice of a narrator. It may seem ironic to name a woman but makes her silent even though she is the medium by which men make binding ties. Rahmah’s revision of Hang Li Po, however, breathes life into the character of the Chinese princess – she talks, she sings, she cries and she laughs. By drawing on and reworking a Malay classical story, Rahmah enters the text from a new critical direction, what Adrienne Rich calls “the act of re-vision”. By re-visioning, Rahmah offers to give voice to Li Po’s silent and marginal life. Centering on the Chinese princess’s loneliness and misplaced love for Hang Jebat, the playwright also makes creative additions which reveal the ways in which she views gender relationship.

In recent years, Rahmah says, Malay playwrights have appropriated Malay traditional works for altered ends that ultimately makes cultural change possible. This effort of retrieval permits different voices, aspects, colours, lights, shadings, and textures to be heard, seen, and felt. By giving Hang Li Po a life and breaking her silence, Rahmah’s transvaluation provides an outlet for a continual re-processing in defying male ideology which has peripheral’s women of Malay court.

Before I begin my comparison, I intend to show the importance of Hang Li Po in *Sejarah Melayu*. To do this, I appropriate the theory of exchange which explains the motives behind the transfer of women from one household to another. *Sejarah Melayu* portrays exchange as a highly significant activity, where both material object (including people and animals) and immaterial objects (including greetings and sentiments) transfer between individuals and groups of people. Varied forms of exchange characterize Malay court society, such as gift giving, the exchange of women, and an exchange of courtesies and favours. In the case of Hang Li Po, whose presence is evoked ephemerally, can be seen in the light of exchange theory to contribute to enhancing social relations, although the manner in which her story is evoked renders her irrelevant as an actor and agent of history. An examination of Hang Li Po using exchange theory will show that she cannot be dismissed as a peripheral figure in the history of Malay monarchy.

Here I produce the story of Hang Li Po:

When news reached China of the greatness of the Raja of Malaka, the Raja of China sent envoys to Malaka: and as a complimentary gift to accompany his letter he sent needles, a whole shipload of them. And when the envoys reached Malaka, the king ordered the letter to be fetched from the ship with due ceremony and borne in procession. And when it had been brought into the palace it was received by a herald and given by him to the reader of the mosque, who read it out. It ran as follows: "This letter from His Majesty the Raja of Heaven is sent to the Raja of Malaka. We hear that the Raja of Malaka is a great raja and we desire accordingly to be on terms of amity with the Raja of Malaka. Of a truth there are no rajas in this world greater than ourselves, and there is no one who knoweth the number of our subjects. We have asked for one needle from each house in our realm and those are the needles with which the ship we send to Malaka is laden."

When Sultan Mansur Syah heard how the letter ran he smiled. He then gave orders that the ship should be cleared of the needles and filled with fried sago. Tun Perpateh Puteh, younger brother of Bendahara Paduka Raja, was then commanded by Sultan Mansur Syah to go as envoy to China. He set out and after a voyage of some length arrived at his destination. The Raja of China ordered the Malaka letter to be borne in procession, but the procession was halted at the house of the chief minister, whose name was Ling Ho. [...] Presently he [the Raja of China] appeared, faintly visible through the glass of the dragon's mouth litter on which he was borne. Thereupon all those present bowed their heads and lifted not their faces. The letter from Malaka was read and the Raja of China was well pleased to hear what it said. And the sago was brought before the Raja of China, and he asked how it was made. And Tun Perpateh Puteh answered, "After this fashion, your Highness: our Raja ordered each of his subjects should roll out a grain of sago until there were enough to fill a ship. That will indicate how many are the subjects of our Raja, no man knows their number!" Then said the Raja of China, "Great indeed must be this Raja of Malaka! The multitude of his subjects must be the multitude of our own. It would be well that I should marry him with my own daughter!" And turning to Ling Ho the Raja of China said, "If even the Raja of Malaka can order his subjects to do such work as rolling out grains of sago, by how much the more can I! In future all rice for eating is to be husked grain by grain, there is to be no more pounding." [...] And when the season of the year for the return voyage to Malaka was come, the Raja of China bade Ling Ho make ready ships to convey Ling, his daughter, to Malaka. Ling Ho did so, and when the ships were nearly ready, the Raja of China chose out five hundred youths of noble birth (sons of ministers) with a high officer in command,
to escort his daughter (Princess Hang Liu; and several hundred beautiful women-attendants accompanied her). And when the ships were ready, Tun Perpateh Puteh sought the Raja’s leave to return to Malaka and the (Raja’s) letter was borne in procession to the ship. Tun Perpateh (then) set sail for Malaka, which he reached after a voyage of some length. Word was brought to Sultan Mansur Syah that Tun Perpateh Puteh had arrived, bringing with him a daughter of the Raja of China. Sultan Mansur Syah was well pleased and gave orders to his chiefs and war-chiefs to welcome her. And when they had met the party, they brought the Princess into the palace with every mark of honour and distinction. And when she appeared, Sultan Mansur Syah was astonished by the beauty of Princess Hang Liu, daughter of Raja of China, and he gave orders that she embrace the faith of Islam. When this had been done, Sultan Mansur Syah married the princess, daughter of the Raja of China: and by her he had a son to whom he gave the name of Paduka Mimat. [This Paduka Mimat had a son named Paduka Sri China, who in turn had a son named Paduka Ahmat, father of Paduka Isap.] [. . .]

The king thereupon commanded Tun Telanai and Mentri Jana Putra to go (as envoys) to China, for now for the first time Sultan Mansur Syah was sending ‘obeisance’ to the Raja of China, having married his daughter. [. . .] And when it had been interpreted to the Raja of China he was well pleased to hear that the Raja of Malaka sent ‘obeisance’ to him. Hardly had this happened when the Raja of China fell sick and was stricken with chloasma all over his body. He ordered that a doctor be sent for to treat the complaint, but though treatment was applied by the doctor the Raja was not cured: and though he sent for doctors by the hundred to treat him, there was still no cure. At last however an aged doctor said to him, “May it please your Highness, the disease from which you are suffering is beyond the powers of all of us to cure, because it is due to a specific cause.” And when the Raja of China inquired what might be the cause, the aged doctor replied, “Your Highness, the cause is that the Raja of Malaka sent ‘obeisance.’ That, your Highness, is a judgment upon you. Your Highness must drink water used by the Raja of Malaka for washing his feet and you must bathe in that water, or this sickness that afflicts your Highness will not be cured.” When the Raja of China heard the words of the aged doctor, he ordered envoys to be sent to Malaka to ask for water that had been used for washing the feet of the Raja of Malaka. [. . .] And the Raja of China drank of the water used for washing Sultan Mansur Syah’s feet and bathed himself with it, and forthwith the chloasma disappeared entirely from the body of the Raja of China and he was cured. He then took an oath that never again would he accept ‘obeisance’ from the Raja of Ujong Tanah (and that oath holds good) to the present day. For the Raja of China
said, “All ye who come after me, never demand ‘obeisance’ from the Raja of Malaka or those that come after him, but only friendship on equal terms.” (MA, 80 – 87)

This story illustrates the competition and rivalry between two rulers, neither of whom wants to concede inferiority. Hang Li Po’s exchange from her father’s household to the Malay ruler’s household exemplifies the cementing of an alliance between two kingdoms to avert the potential for conflict which characterizes their relationship.

According to the story, the Chinese Emperor is driven by two motivations: first, the Malay ruler seems as invincible as the Emperor himself, in terms of his subjects and wit. Second, because of the Malay Raja’s apparent superiority, the emperor must find a way to subjugate him. By giving Sultan Mansur Syah a wife of Chinese royal descent indeed, his own daughter the Chinese Emperor would create a permanent link. As Valeri says of marriage transactions:

a woman is more valuable because she does more than endure: she reproduces. By giving one of their women to another group the wife-givers give it its existence – that is, its duration over time. And by the same movement they give up the possibility of using her for their own reproduction as a group. (9)

Similarly, Gayle Rubin affirms that “the result of a gift of women is more profound than the result of other gift transactions, because the relationship established is not just one of reciprocity, but one of kinship.” Because the exchange is a one-off transaction, Hang Li Po’s marriage comes into the category of forming an alliance, rather than a practice of exogamous arrangement, which refers to a systematic custom of marrying a person belonging to another tribe, clan, or similar social unit. In Valerri’s words, “[i]t is alliance rather than exogamy, then, that dictates the transfer of the woman as a source of descent” (9). Certainly the Chinese ruler also seeks political ascendancy. Being a wife-giver, he is hierarchically superior than the Malay ruler. His gift is calculated to coerce Melaka into indebtedness because Princess Hang Li Po, being a direct and abiding link to her father, binds Sultan Mansur Syah into submission. The Chinese Emperor’s strategy of asserting the role of wife-giver allows him to create a system of rank because wife-giving affords a superior position to wife-taking. Valeri also describes alliances “in terms of loss and compensation” (10), so that when the Chinese

Emperor loses his daughter to the Malay Sultan in order to create affinal links, his compensation is in the form of continual “obeisance” from Melaka which constantly recreates his superiority over his Malay counterpart.

The giving of Hang Li Po corners Sultan Mansur Syah into subservience because he has to concede to making obeisance which the author of Sejarah Melayu reports as an unaccustomed situation for the Sultan. But objects of exchange, according to the theory of exchange, constitute prestige, status, and legitimacy. For example, Strathern’s argument that women stand for a “component of clanship or for assets which a body of men possesses: in short it is when they are exchanged that women are seen as aspects of men’s social identities” (Gender of the Gift, 331). Of course the scribe depicts Sultan Mansur Syah as a reluctant partner in the exchange, but the fact that he is married to the daughter of the Emperor himself confers him the same prestige as the Chinese one and legitimizes his own sovereignty.

Nevertheless, the ruler’s offering of “obeisance” blights his Malay daulat and instantaneously marks his inferior position to the Chinese Emperor. So, the story then takes a different twist. The Chinese Emperor, on receiving Sultan Mansur Syah’s obeisance is stricken with chloasma. What are we to take this illness to mean? In the historical context of Sejarah Melayu, a person may be infected with chloasma, an unsightly and uncomfortable skin disease, upon skin contact with a person of royal blood, suggesting a unhealthy union between that royal figure and common person. Thus, the Emperor’s chloasma via his daughter’s contact with Sultan Mansur Syah serves to show that he is not sufficiently royal for the Malay Sultan to be making “obeisance” despite the conventions of showing indebtedness to his wife’s father. The daulat of the Malay ruler is such that his expression of obligation to the Chinese king cannot sit well.

Sultan Mansur Syah’s superiority is quickly restored. Rendering the ruler’s discarded feet-washing water as a prestigious item, worthy as a gift, demonstrates the author’s agenda in belittling Hang Li Po’s importance in the story. The feet-washing water is an extremely rare, one-off gift, and its place in the Malay model of spheres is difficult to ascertain. As Ian Morris argues, “each rank of gifts normally has an appropriate social context in which it is used.” The Raja’s feet-washing water, normally useless and never a gift, becomes precious than the princess herself. Morris further says:

Spheres of exchange can act as a very powerful means of exercising

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social control. Whereas status depends upon being able to give away top ranked gifts, a group within society can attempt to perpetuate itself by limiting access to the vital items, either through controlling the supply or else sumptuary rules. (8 – 9)

Using Morris’ frame of analysis, I suggest that the Malay Raja has converted a nonentity (his water) into a high-ranked gift to demonstrate his control over the Chinese monarch. The incongruity between the easy availability of his feet-washing water (especially because he is a Muslim who needs to wash his feet five times a day before performing the obligatory prayers) and the labour of Hang Li Po, alienated from family, religion and country highlights the woman’s immense sacrifice.

Hang Li Po, who is supposed to have been the medium by which her father retains his superiority, yields to another medium her husband’s feet-washing water which brings about an equitable relationship. The author negates her significance in the whole exchange by implying that even the Malay king’s remnants of feet-washing water is pure enough for to cleanse the diseased relationship. But by analyzing this episode through the lens of exchange theory, we can subvert the scribe’s silencing of Hang Li Po. Through her connection to her father, she has bestowed legitimacy to Sultan Mansur Syah’s sovereignty to the extent that he can now claim his superior position to the Chinese Emperor. Instead of being a peripheral figure in history, she is central to the action of the story because of her service to her father and her husband, both of whom have had their status enhanced by her exchange. Because her father has “lost” her through her marriage to the Malay Sultan, he perpetually loses his spiritual potency, resulting in his contact with chloasma, while Sultan Mansur Syah, by gaining Hang Li Po, acquires authority.

I now want to compare Chinese historical documents which describe Malay-Chinese relationship. Three documents provide this information: Ying-yai Sheng-ian, Hsing-ch’a Sheng-ian and Ming Shi-Lu. The Ming Shi-Lu, or Ming Imperial Annals, has a more comprehensive and chronologically precise account of the Melaka-China relationship. These Chinese texts, written over approximately two and a half centuries until the formal end of the Ming dynasty in 1644, contains over a hundred references to Melaka.7 Chinese accounts of the relationship between Melaka and China reveal a different picture to that drawn in Sejarah Melayu which describes the relationship as antagonistic at first and amicable only after the marriage of the ruler with Hang Li Po. The Chinese documents disclose that China initiated the social exchange between the two kingdoms, and that the exchanges indicated Chinese superiority.

Ying-yai Sheng-lan (1451), written by Ma Huan, one of Cheng Ho’s chief assistants reveals that Melaka was then under the rule of Siam:

it [Melaka] paid an annual [tribute] of 40 taels of gold. Default [in this matter] would have provoked an attack. In the seventh year of the ssu-sh'ou [period] of the Yung-lo [Emperor] [A.D. 1409] the eunuch Cheng-Ho, [in his capacity] as imperial envoy, conveyed [to Melaka] the commands of the Emperor, [in token of which] he bestowed on the chieftain of that country a pair of silver seals, a head-dress, a girdle, and a long robe. He raised the place to the status of a city, since when it has been known as the Kingdom of Melaka. Henceforth the Siamese dared not venture to attack it, and the ruler, now by the imperial favour [styled] king, proceeded in company with his consort to the capital [of China], where he expressed his gratitude and offered products of his country as tribute.10

This record reveals two important details about Melaka, absent in the Sejarah Melayu. First, in the eyes of the Chinese Emperor, Melaka was not even regarded as a sovereign kingdom, and its ruler was perceived merely as a Chieftain, certainly not powerful enough to pose threats to China. Second, Melaka was already in an obeisance relationship with Siam. With the Chinese invitation to enter into a relationship of exchange, Melaka transferred its annual tribute from Siam to China. Hsing-ch’a Sheng-lan records a similar tributary relation between Melaka and China. Fei Hsin mentions that the Chinese Emperor:

sets up a tablet [stating that] Melaka had been raised to the rank of a kingdom, but at first Siam refused to recognize it. In the thirteenth year [of Yung-lo] (1415), the ruler [of Melaka, desirous of] showing his gratitude for the Imperial bounty, crossed the ocean and, accompanied by his consort and son, came to court with tribute. The Emperor rewarded him [appropriately], whereupon [the ruler of Melaka] returned to his own country.11

The Ming Shi-Lu records that on 3 October 1405, Bai-li-mi-su-la (Parameswara) sent an envoy to China to offer tribute.12 In fact, each time a new ruler succeeded the throne, the Chinese Emperor sent his envoy to have the new ruler invested, an action which points to his authority over Melaka.

The exchange between the two kingdoms takes the form what Sahlins calls “balanced reciprocity,” where a central authority figure

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8 Admiral Cheng Ho was a Ming imperial envoy who established a diplomatic relationship between China and Melaka.
9 16 taels/tahil (or 1 kati) is equivalent to 600 grams.
12 Wade, 62.
receives tributes and redistributes these items. Reciprocity of this kind is often weak and therefore of great benefit to the infirm and destitute.  

Because Melaka was already in an obeisance relationship with Siam, the Chinese perceives Melaka as a weak state needing protection. Lorraine Aragon, in her study of the Tobaku region of Central Sulawesi, says that:

In pre-colonial Southeast Asian communities an initial gift, even by a social inferior, generally obliged the recipient to accept the prostration and thereby become indebted to the giver. Highlanders therefore were not only giving gifts of subordination and worship to lowland rulers but also staking economics, political, and spiritual claims. What was exchanged between highlanders and lowlanders may not necessarily have been material gifts of equal value when measured in terms of either internal or external markets. There was, however, pattern of hierarchical reciprocity with a potential for indebtedness on either side although local assessments of the debt balance may well have varied between the two groups.

The flow of gifts from China to Melaka and vice versa offers compelling evidence that China was hierarchically higher than its Malay counterparts. The Chinese gifts include many exotic items such as "a girdle with precious stones, horses with saddles, a hundred ounces of gold, five hundred ounces of silver, four hundred thousand koan of paper-money and 2600 strings of copper cash; further 300 pieces of silk gauze, a thousand pieces of plain silk and two pieces of silk with golden flowers." The gifts of Malay rulers cannot possibly match these excessive gifts. The Ming Shi-ku also tells that Melaka rulers brought "tribute" every year or every two years (11) while the Chinese Emperor gave "rewards" in exchange. Tribute is defined here as an unambiguously obligatory payment, in contrast to a reward, which is presented as altruistically given. The two different terms used by the Chinese scribe to describe the exchanges illuminate their inequitable character of the relationship between China and Melaka.

Further scrutiny of the Ming Shi-ku reveals more engaging details about the nature of gift giving between the two kingdoms. In one instance, in the year 1456:

Sultan Wu-ta-fu-na-sha [Muzaffar Syah] sent as tribute horses and products of his country, and asked to be invested as king. The Emperor issued a decree by which an officer was sent there for the purpose, but some time afterwards the same king sent tribute

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13 Jan van Baal, *Reciprocity and the Position of Women* (Assen: van Gorcum, 1975)
15 "Ming Shih," Bastin and Winks, 11.
again and reported that the cap and the girdle, which had been bestowed upon him, were burned. The Emperor then ordered that a cap of leather, a dress, a daily dress of red silk gauze, a girdle adorned with rhinoceros-horn and a cap of gauze should be given as replacements.16

This appeal for substitutes suggests that Malay rulers valued the Chinese gifts very highly, perhaps because the gifts are seen as representing the ruler’s own political potency, which props up claims of his leadership through a supplication for ties with more powerful authorities.

Negligence in offering tributes shows a lack of respect. In 1431, the Melakan ruler Sri Maharaja sent three envoys to China to request help against Siam’s attack:

the king wanted to come himself but was afraid of being detained by them, that he wished to send a report but had nobody who could write it, and that he had ordered therefore to avail themselves of a tribute-vessel from Sumatra, to go and bring this communication. The Emperor sent them back to their country in the ships of Cheng Ho, to whom a decree was given for the King of Siam, ordering him to live in good harmony with his neighbours and not to act against the orders of the court. When these three envoys arrived they brought nothing as tribute, and the officers of the Board of Rites submitted that, according to the rule, they should not get any present; but the Emperor replied: “These men have come many thousands of miles to complain of an injustice; it would not do to give them nothing.” Accordingly dresses and silks were given to them, just as to other tribute-bearers. (11–12)

The protest of the Chinese officials shows the importance of reciprocity. More importantly, this record reveals Malay dependency on Chinese political power.

The Ming Shi-Lu records that on 13 September 1459, the “Ming court sends envoy to enfeoff Su-dan Mang-su Sha [Sultan Mansur Syah], son of deceased Su-lu-tan Wu-da-fo-na Sha [Sultan Muzaffar Syah], as king of the country of Melaka.” Geoff Wade describes the Chinese recognition of Sultan Mansur Syah’s kingship:

Your forebears have for generations reverently guarded your feudatory state. Rule passed to your father, but not long after he inherited the position, he suddenly passed away [. . .] You are the legitimate heir and you have been able to send an envoy to present tribute of local products and to request orders from the Court. In view of your worthiness, it is appropriate that you inherit rule of the country.

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16 Bastin and Winks, 12.
I am thus especially sending envoys with a proclamation enfeoffing you as king of the country of Melaka [. . .] (40).

By the time of Sultan Mansur Syah’s reign (1459 – 1477), Melaka would be paying tribute to China for at least half a century. Thus, the claim of Sejarah Melayu that Sultan Mansur Syah is paying obeisance for the first time is a “creative” strategy to assert Malay supremacy to the listening audience.

Liang Liji, who has carried out extensive research on Melaka-Chinese relations, finds no evidence of a marriage between a Ming princess and a Malay Sultan. Although he does not discount the fact that such a marriage alliance was possible, since the Han dynasty Chinese Emperors were known to have married off their daughters to their allies, the fact that this important marriage was not recorded is odd because, as we have seen in the excerpts quoted previously, the Chinese scribe is usually meticulous about the types of gifts exchange from Melaka to China and vice versa. Wade is more forthright, saying that:

there is nothing in the Ming texts which supports the existence of Sultan Mansur Syah’s famed wife, the Chinese princess Hang Liu (or Hang Li Po). If indeed a member of the Chinese imperial household had married a ruler from beyond China, it would have been fully documented in the Ming Shi-Lu or other official Chinese texts. No evidence for such a marriage exists in any of the Chinese texts examined. (49)

These Chinese records give an alternative point of view to the Melakan one. Clearly in the Chinese version, Melaka is a state under the suzerainty of China. While the Chinese records do not give the impression that China and Melaka are at all competitive, the Sejarah Melayu presents two kingdoms which are often trying to outdo each other’s greatness, and the story of Hang Li Po gives the ultimate glory to the ruler of Melaka.

The story of Hang Li Po’s exchange reveals the Malay view about the exchange of women. The fact that her story is invoked can be seen as evidence of the weight Malays place on women as the cementer of alliances. More importantly, it shows the Malay wish to assert hierarchical superiority. While the Chinese king does not presumably feel indebted to the Malays, the chloasma story seeks to reverse the real historical circumstances to emphasize the grandeur of Sultan Mansur Syah. According to Sejarah Melayu, the Malay king does not have significant wealth compared to his Chinese counterpart. But his mystical power is rendered finally as far more potent than the Chinese king’s.

Through the lens of exchange theory, I have put Hang Li Po back into the narrative which presents her as silent and insignificant. Indeed, she is central to the action in the story because her presence and connection to China alters Melaka’s status from political insecurity into political authority.

The long detour into exchange theory and Chinese historical documents reveals the importance of Hang Li Po in Sejarah Melayu. To a certain extent, Rahmah’s Puteri Li Po recognises the centrality of Hang Li Po in the Melakan court. The playwright sets the stage for the Chinese princess to voice her feelings and articulate her version of the story. For example, Hang Li Po’s feelings for being separated from her family and familiar surroundings are absent in Sejarah Melayu. Her anguish, however, comes across clearly in Puteri Li Po:

Most unfortunate
Most unfortunate I am
To be engulfed in this fate
Father and mother
Willingly parted with me
I am sent to this country
So foreign
So confusing to me
Never did I expected
My status is so low
For in the honour bestowed
I am but just one of his wives
Just another wife. (PLP, 641 – 642)

Severed from her roots, Li Po sees herself as cursed. She does not understand the customs; even the fruits taste bitter and alien. Moreover, she becomes one of the Sultan’s secondary wives, a status which she finds humiliating. By portraying Sultan Mansor as a metamorphosis of Jin Afrit, a wicked genie known for its callous ways, Rahmah reveals Li Po’s psychological trauma which the princess experiences in her sleep. The Sultan/Jin Afrit becomes the seducer who imposes his will on her reluctant body and mind. But in her subconscious, Li Po is able to reject the king:

Hey genie so ugly stops pestering me.
Go look for someone of your standing.
Come not to woo me for I do not like you.
One be look at you, a month long would my appetite for food be stilled. (PLP, 641)

In Sejarah Melayu, Sultan Mansur Syah falls in love with Hang Li Po’s beauty rather than the person. The Chinese Princess does not have a say regarding the Sultan’s appearance. By articulating Li Po’s abhorrence of the king, Rahmah shows the full range of emotions of a
woman who is understandably fearful of her foreign husband. By exploring and exposing Li Po’s suffering, the playwright attempts to reach further into the subconscious and lay bare the woman’s heart.

In *Sejarah Melayu*, the core of the Hang Li Po episode is to emphasize the invincibility of Malay *daulat*. Thus, Sultan Mansur Syah’s feet-washing water is shown as being more potent than the princess or her father. In Rahmah’s re-vision, the Raja’s *daulat* does not form the focus of the story; instead the modern reader is faced with a princess in dilemma. Li Po is attracted to Hang Jebat and openly declares her love for him. Readers might argue that Jebat’s rejection of Li Po’s love (because of the fear of *derhaka*) depicts a conventional portrayal of unrequited love. Rahmah’s re-vision is limited because the storyline of Hang Li Po is already dictated by the original version. Li Po’s misplaced love, however, shows the extent of her loneliness. Sharing the Sultan with three other women takes its toll on the Princess as well as her husband, as Li Po complains to Jebat, “...My lord, I have been so lonely these past few days. The king has not visited for the past five day.” (*PLP*, 660). Raden Galuh’s advice to Li Po also exposes the predicaments of polygynous marriages: “I understand your predicament. Between us we share the same fate. Believe me your grief is also my grief. The only difference is that I experienced it first.” (*PLP*, 649). The suffering of these women and the sisterhood shown in this drama are completely erased in *Sejarah Melayu*. Women are shown as being jealous of one another as in the case of Sang Rajuna Tapa’s daughter, Raja Iskandar Syah’s favourite concubine, who later becomes the subject of ridicule because other concubines spread malicious rumours about her.18 Rahmah’s focus on amiability of female relationship thus constitute a re-vision from the stereotypes of bickering women as represented in *Sejarah Melayu*.

Closing Remarks

The story of Hang Li Po highlights the ways in which women are central in men’s dynasty-making strategies but their silent presence tends to conceal their significance. By analyzing Hang Li Po from the perspectives of exchange theory, I have dismantled the patriarchal methods of making women historically unimportant. As I pull away the threads strung together to immortalize the history of kings, the fabric of male discourse shows signs of fraying.

As I have explained at length, Hang Li Po is primarily perceived as a gift because of her ability to reproduce. Her giving is motivated by the desire to establish permanent relationship between the giver and

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18 see *The Malay Annals*, 41.
the receiver. Because she is valued as a reproductive member, what Weiner calls a “system of reproduction,” that is, Li Po has the ability to form, produce, and create something new according to the cultural desire for regeneration.

Weiner’s argument shifts the reciprocal paradigm of gift-giving to focus instead on the characteristics of gifts as reproducing relations. Because of the fear of loss, decay or death, all societies, argues Weiner, “make commitment to the reproduction of their most valued resources, i.e. resources that encompass human reproduction as well as the regeneration of social, material, and cosmological phenomena.” The Malay court society values ruler legitimacy, *daulat*, subjects’ loyalty and political authority. Because the erosion of any of these things will affect the integrity and raise doubts about the sovereignty of Malay rulers, they are committed to reproduce these intangible things through the exchange of women. As Raden Galoh in Rahmah’s drama emphasizes, “we are both tools for the purpose of enhancing the sovereignty.” (*PLP*, 650) which highlights the enduring value of women.

Weiner’s perspective renders women to be of central importance although they remain the object of transactions. The Emperor of China desires continuing obeisance from his counterpart which the exchange of Hang Li Po generates for him. Although she loses out to Sultan Mansur Syah’s feet-washing water, as the scribe perceives the event, the fact that she is present in *Sejarah Melayu*, contrary to the Chinese historical sources, strongly suggests that the Melakan king uses her to assert his political supremacy since through her, he is able to establish affinal links with China. In Rahmah’s re-vision, the Sultan reiterates this fact because his marriage to the princess is a *tuah* – a sign of his auspiciousness. Li Po’s pregnancy is a further boost to this link because through her reproductive ability, Melaka will become more prosperous.

In discussing the issue on whether women merely operate as objects transferred by and between men, Jan Van Baal raises this important question: “[a]re women simply objects [...] or do they agree to be objects, i.e. subjects willingly agreeing to behave as objects?” (71). He claims that the need for female cooperation in marriage, female labour in food economy, and female reproductive function are the three factors which support his contention that women are “exchanged because they agree to be exchanged” (76). His argument exposes the fact that women are essential for successful social relations between men. But...

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because they are "items" transacted between men, their agency in the exchange remains covert and their significance indistinct.

Here we observe the gap between women's central importance and their silent presence. While the story of Hang Li Po provides fleshed-out male characters, the woman herself is mute, passive, and inert. The men are portrayed in possessing complex subjectivities whereas Li Po is presented as a voiceless gift who disappears from the text once she has fulfilled her function of reproducing social relations. Because of the ways she is presented in the text, and the manner in which the scribe has positioned our reading of her silent figure, she will be remembered as a character of little consequence. But the exchange theory used here and my comparison with Rahmah's drama make visible the nature and causes of Li Po's subordination and reveal the degree to which men rely on her to generate political power and maintain social harmony. The lens of exchange theory and the re-vision of Rahmah imbue Li Po's silence with meaning, revealing cracks and slippages in the male discourse which confines women to the perimeter of history.

References


