

Maternal Monstrosity in “The Tale of Si Tanggang”

NURUL FATEHA

*Department of English Language and Literature,
International Islamic University (IIUM), Malaysia*

WAN NUR MADIHA RAMLAN

*Department of English Language and Literature,
International Islamic University (IIUM), Malaysia
madyramlan@iium.edu.my*

ABSTRACT

The figure of the Mother occupies a complex, often ambiguous space within Malay cultural imaginaries, in which she is both glorified (“good”) and vilified (“bad”). This paper presents an analysis of Deruma, the mother in the popular Malay folktale “Si Tanggang” and how her punishment of turning him into stone is a form of maternal monstrosity. After her son insults and rejects her, she curses him into stone. The conceptualisation of maternal monstrosity in this paper follows, first and foremost, one of the denotations for the word monster, namely “a thing of extraordinary or daunting size.” Secondly, this paper also considers the etymology of the word monster, which comes from Latin monstrum, meaning to reveal and to warn. Then, Jeffrey Cohen’s proposition is adapted, which positions the monster’s body as a cultural one to analyse Si Deruma’s body language (facial expressions, speech, and action), ontology, and relations with others around her. From these findings, possible revelations or warnings from the tale and Si Deruma’s final act of monstrous curse will be considered in order to define the idea of maternal monstrosity in the context of this tale. At the end of this paper, we will demonstrate that maternal monstrosity can be read as an expression of female anxiety in a patriarchal society and a temporary exit from the ideals of mothering.

Keywords: maternal monstrosity; Malay culture; Malay folktale; monstrous; mothers

INTRODUCTION

Motherhood is both a concept and experience that require the mother to be highly invested. Similarly, Adrienne Rich (1976, p. 13) delineates motherhood as both a potential relationship and an institution. It is due to this dual nature of motherhood that the mother is put on a pedestal in many societies as demonstrated by various literary, cultural and political narratives. In her examination of maternal abandonment in fiction, Jennifer Martin (2021) observes that while there is much reverence for mothers, a strong fascination exists for those who are seen as aberrant and monstrous. Similarly, the Malay culture holds mothers in high regard, often portraying them as sacred. Yet, the Malay culture also tends to portray mothers in a profane light as there are stories of mothers who abandon their children out of spite, as in the case of “Batu Belah Batu Bertangkup”. This is a popular Malay folktale in Malaysia, where the Mother abandons her young children and commits suicide by letting herself be eaten by a carnivorous cavern after her son is disobedient. Similarly, the trope of the aberrant mother is demonstrated by the belief in horrifying female beings such as the *Langsuir*, flying demons who were once women who have died in childbirth, or in some versions, a woman who dies of shock after hearing that her baby is stillborn (Skeat, 1900, p. 326). This preoccupation of mothers as profane continues well into today’s popular culture in Malaysia and it is through these continued representations that many cultural conflicts and anxieties reside.

With this in mind, this paper considers the notion of maternal monstrosity by examining Deruma, the mother in the Malay folktale of “Si Tanggang”, and her punishment of her son. Interestingly, Deruma is always representative of the sacred mother trope. Therefore, her actions to punish and murder her son are rarely analysed in depth. In analysing maternal monstrosity through Deruma’s motherhood and later, the reclamation of her sense of self and agency through her curse, she is not a monster. Far from it in fact, we identify instead the daunting gravity of her curse on Tanggang as monstrous and with that, her motherhood as a form of maternal monstrosity in the sense that the curse reveals and warns about Deruma’s capacity as a mother and a person. In analysing the curse as a monstrous culmination of mothering gone extreme, we see Deruma as simply exercising her right and performing her duty as Tanggang’s mother, that when he is disobedient, she simply puts him in his place. This is why Deruma is not a monster, only that her curse is monstrous and that has been enabled through invoking a divine power and strengthened with her committed mothering of her son. The petrification and simultaneously, murder of her son is also Deruma’s exercising agency, and that as a person, she refuses to be treated with disrespect, moreover by her own son. In doing so, we see Deruma in the tradition of Medea, as mothers who kill their children to whom they themselves have given life, although for different reasons.

The rationale for this paper comes from an existing gap in academic research on female figures particularly mothers in Malay folktales, and generally in Malay cultural history. Apart from practices relating to prenatal and antenatal care, there is scant research on the Mother and mothering from sociocultural, historical, and literary perspectives. An understanding of mothers and motherhood can be examined through folk stories as there is a preponderance for maternal characters. This paper is ultimately motivated by our curiosity over representations of mothers in Malay folktales, as their characterisations range from silent and selfless to vengeful and suicidal. We are particularly interested in the popular tale of “Si Tanggang” for the mother’s monstrous punishment of her son.

“The Tale of Si Tanggang” is one of the most well-known and popular Malay folktales because of its focus on the concept of filial piety and the fate of an ungrateful son. While there are variations of the story within the Nusantara region, it is essentially about a poor young man who ventures far from home to make something of himself. Years later, when he becomes a rich and reputable merchant, he marries an aristocrat’s daughter and returns to his homeland with his bride. Once home, he renounces his parents as strangers because he feels humiliated by his humble roots and their shabby appearance. In her sadness, Deruma asks God to punish her son and he is cursed into stone and in some versions, an eagle (see “Si Tanggang versi Muar disumpah menjadi helang”, Kosmo.com.my, Oct 2020). Even today, Tanggang is the epitome of the unfilial child (*anak derhaka*) in Malay culture and his ghastly end is often viewed as well-deserved because of his offensive behaviour to his parents, particularly to his mother. In recent times, many new popular media try to mediate on what takes place in the original tale such as Adifitri Ahmad’s *Taubat Si Tanggang* (2015) and the appearance of Deruma (Upin & Ipin: Keris Siamang Tunggal, 2019). Shaiful Bahri Md. Razi (2015, p. 249) comments that Malay culture views the act of *derhaka* or *durhaka* as an unacceptable and sinful act towards one’s parents and that this tale of the ungrateful son seems to be a cultural inheritance of the Nusantara region.

According to Muhammad Haji Salleh (2005, p. 334), there are over twenty versions of the prodigal son tale in the Nusantara region. The tale is called “Si Tanggang” (or “Tanggang”) in Malaysia, “Nakhoda Manis” in Brunei, and “Malin Kundang” in Indonesia. William Skeat in *Malay Magic* (1900) cites a similar story called “Charitra Mēgat Sajobang” (The Tale of Mēgat Sajobang), a well-known story among the Selangor (a state in Malaysia) Malays whereby the

prodigal son is from the indigenous Sakai community. Whilst the tale is popular for its didactic narrative of filial piety and usually focuses on Tanggang's actions and tragic end, this research shifts the spotlight from him to Deruma to examine what her actions can reveal about how mothers are positioned within Malay culture.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The tale of Tanggang has received considerable scholarly attention. Several papers have examined the didactic properties befitting its reputation as a well-known folktale across the Nusantara. Mentioned earlier is Shaiful Bahri Md. Radzi's "The Modern Tanggang and the Change of Meaning in the Tales of the Ungrateful Son" (2015). This paper emphasises that the ungrateful son is a familiar motif in Malay folk literature and has a pedagogic quality for morality and social conduct. The author links this folkloric motif to the issue of the neglect of the growing elderly population in Malaysia in the twenty-first century. The author also dubs those who refuse to be responsible for their elderly parents as the "modern Tanggang." Similar to one of the papers below, Shaiful uses Quranic verses to strengthen his argument that the folktale has lost its effectiveness as a means of social control. This claim, however, is not systematically proven by the author as there is no evidence that the folktale has direct correlation with issues of caregiving for the elderly. This paper is an example that while the tale of Tanggang is well embedded in Malay folklore, its use in scholarly papers can vary in terms of academic fields as well as actual relevance. Some approaches can be reductive and result in the negligence of its intrinsic values and its characters in relation to sociohistorical changes.

Much like other folktales, the tale of Tanggang has also been used in pedagogical research involving children, such as Mumtaz Begum Aboo Backer's "Folktales, Trans-locality and the Construction of Social Values by Children" (2019). Mumtaz (2019, p. 234) problematises the scant use of heritage folklore in disseminating values and beliefs, owing to the younger generation's overfamiliarity with online platforms. The construction of artistic expressions is positioned as a method to produce "new bearers of the new narratives" by incorporating the production of the *wayang kulit* (shadow puppets) and the themes of heritage folktales and translocality. The tale of Tanggang is one of the tales selected for the child participants' engagement with issues including demography and their familiarity with folktales. Mumtaz's research demonstrates child readers' agency in contextualising local elements against their own spatio-temporality by not simply identifying the values but also practicing it during the making of the shadow puppets. This paper shows the children's capability to identify their own internalised values that coincide with those in folktales, including the tale of Tanggang. The didactic elements in this folktale, therefore, continue to be central to its use in academic research, as exemplified in the two papers above, and with various research methodologies.

Whilst the other papers focus on the didactic nature of the story, Muhammad Irfan Waquiuddin Hasanudin and Muhd Norizam Jamian's "Narratological Structure and the Image of the Mother in the Legendary Story of Si Tenggang, Si Malin Kundang, and Nakhoda Manis" (2021) is more thematically relevant to the current study. This paper examines the relationship between the image of the Mother in the three Southeast Asian versions of the insolent son tale. The authors identify two main traits of the Mother in the stories, including their full submission to God, after being abandoned and bullied by their son when they have waited for his return with utmost loyalty. These two traits essentially underline the Mother's grave disappointment with her

son's behaviour. Helpless, the Mother leaves his fate to God as they pray for a befitting punishment. The paper argues that it is these very traits that drive the tale and cements it as the regional cautionary tale and the son as an example of filial impiety.

In analysing several textual evidence, the authors performed a narratological analysis to demonstrate that the Mother, her actions, and the final curse on their son are the result of his behaviour towards her. The two figures are intricately linked so much so that her disappointment can bring unto him a petrification curse, by the will of God. While the paper, to its credit, foregrounds the Mother, a rare approach in scholarly studies on the tale, the authors' analysis of her submission to God and her utmost loyalty towards her son does not indicate her full range of personhood, agency, and empowerment. Instead, the paper romanticises the Mother as the epitome of loyalty and faithful submission to God, enabling her suffering to be glorious in the name of religion. In discussing the Mother's religious submission to God, leaving the son's ill fate to God, the authors use the shortcut of Quranic verses, which are indisputable divine revelations, to validate their findings. The paper thus, while telling readers that the Mother is the crux of the tale, cuts their argument short by saying that her behaviour is exemplary of the Quran, neglecting a more in-depth textual analysis of the narratological devices and characterisation of the mother. This is the gap that our paper aims to fill in recognising the representation of the agentive mother and her monstrous curse in this legendary tale.

In the same vein, Sharifah Aishah Osman's paper "Agency, Adaptation, and Audience: Re-visioning the Legend of Mahsuri in Selected Contemporary Malaysian Young Adult Fiction" (2018) recognises curses as an indicator of agency when uttered by women in folktales. Sharifah's paper does not directly analyse the tale of Tenggang but its analysis demonstrates that folktales containing curses by women who challenge the stereotypical portrayal of the so-called feminine traits, "female virtue and moral behaviour" (Sharifah, 2018, p.10). Sharifah (2018, p. 10) argues that the didactic quality of these representations in Malay folktales indicate the "patriarchal and feudalistic values" that position female characters either as submissive and in constant need of rescue, or as wicked villains. When a female character utters a damning curse, it can disrupt the order of things by challenging not only those who wrong her but also social hierarchy and class struggle. Sharifah's focus on curses by female characters is in direct contrast to the religious glorification of women's sacrifices and commendable behaviour in folktales, even in the face of injustice. It is in this line of thought that our paper positions Deruma's monstrous curse as an indicator of her agency as a person and a mother, two facets that have been denied and undermined by his son's insolent rejection of her. We observe the petrification curse as the embodiment of Deruma's reclaiming her personhood as one who can independently respond to injustice towards herself and her motherhood as she alone is qualified to punish and correct her son's mistreatment of her.

In Abdul Halim Ali (2011)'s "Sajak "Pulang Si Tenggang" dalam "Perspektif Historisisme Baru" ("A New Historicist Perspective on the Poem "Si Tenggang's Homecoming"), the eponymous figure justifies his outburst at his mother and grandmother for their failure to even try to understand him and how his travels have changed him. The poem thus positions Tenggang in a stark contrast to the original namesake, where he is no longer the insolent son who rejects and insults his mother but a person who has been misunderstood. In doing so, the poem also portrays the maternal figures as unreasonable and thus deserving of the modern Tenggang's anger. We observe that this view on Tenggang has its own literary merit through intertextuality and folkloric retelling. However, the poem's autobiographical value, which was written by Muhammad Haji Salleh as a response to criticism that he has forgotten his Malay roots (Abdul, 2011, p. 11), suggests

that there are elements of personal bias. Such retelling cannot justify the original Tanggung's insolence towards his mother, especially because the original tale simply rejects and discards his mother without any provocation from her side. It is not uncommon for folkloric retellings to alter characterisation or even endings, but we opine that the voicelessness of the Mother in the retold poem renders her insignificant and thus, incomparable to our approach to *Deruma*.

Monster-wise, in Gothic studies, Megan de Bruin-Molé considers Frankenfiction, a genre in which fantastical monsters such as vampires, zombies, and werewolves in classic literature, are reconfigured in commercial narratives. De Bruin-Molé (2020, p.51) describes monsters as a stand-in for "deviant or undesirable elements of the body, or of the collapse of the political system because of said elements". In Frankenfiction, where monsters can be parodied, or even take on the role of the hero, monstrosity is divorced from appearance and instead, is aligned with "antithetical moral values" (De Bruin-Molé, p. 54). Monsters in twenty-first century popular culture are also possible expressions of a "nation's fears and anxieties at a particular point in time" (De Bruin-Molé, p.65). This extensive study on Frankenfiction and the popularity of monsters in current popular culture provides us (the authors) with an instrumental premise, that monsters can be read for questionable moral disposition and not just for physical horror. We (the authors) extend this line of thinking into examining our idea of maternal monstrosity.

A paper on female monsters is Carolyn Harford's (2013) analysis on the domestication of folkloric monsters and villains such as the vampire into an "alluring romantic figure who is now a more acceptable and potentially domestic partner" (2013, p. 312). Harford's study humanises vampiric figures by positioning them "on the side of good, that is, on the side of humanity" (2013, p. 303). In contrast, it is the vampire's female counterpart such as that in the *Twilight* film franchise who turns into a vampire and joins the vampiric family in order to pursue the romantic relationship. Harford compares this trope to the stories of "Beauty and the Beast" and "Bluebeard" where the male partner has something to hide, and the female partner has to discover it herself. Furthermore, Harford reads *Twilight*'s Bella turning into a vampire as a "redemption of the monstrous" and the "reconciliation of the monstrous outsider with society" (2013, p. 307). Bella thus, extends the limit of human society to include the vampires. Harford likens this fictional vampiric harmonious inclusion in human society to the change in society where globalisation has enabled contact with those who were previously isolated (2013, p. 312). Harford's study foregrounds the humanising approaches of the monstrous vampire figure, thus inverting the human-vampire dynamics by making the human a vampire. This inversion has romantic undertones and essentially, a (inverted) re-telling of vampire-lore, where Harford emphasises inclusion at a global scale. The monstrosification of the female character is undoubtedly parallel to our paper although of a different tangent.

One of the most prominent monstrous mothers is Grendel's mother. Grendel is the monstrous creature whom the hero Beowulf defeated in the eponymous Old English epic poem (ca. 700 to 750 CE) ([britannica.com](http://www.britannica.com)). Grendel's death is later avenged by his mother, who is often described as a monster. Christine Alfano (1992, p.12), in a re-evaluation of Grendel's mother, criticises her namelessness and errors in translations, which negate her womanhood. Alfano's findings indicate that the mother's monstrosity is not physical but rather, lies in "her alienation," her family ties to Cain, and "her defiance of traditional gender conventions" (12). Her namelessness, that she is only known as Grendel's mother, is similar to the "historical experience of millions of women who were defined through their male narratives" (1992, p. 12). Most translators have refused to distinguish the Mother from Grendel, turning her into a beast because her son is one, when her actual deserving position, following the original poem, is "*ides, aglæcwif*,"

the English equivalent of which is “lady, warrior-woman” (1992, p. 12). Although this study is a 180-degree turn from Alfano’s humanising Grendel’s warrior mother, one similar strand is how feminine figures in fiction could manifest a facet of monstrosity that owes to elements other than her physique. Like Alfano’s re-evaluation of Grendel’s mother as lady and warrior-woman, our paper thus gives recognition to Deruma’s murderous, monstrous curse as constructive, even liberating elements of herself.

TERMINOLOGY AND CONCEPTUALISATION

The idea of maternal monstrosity used in the context of this paper is based on, first and foremost, one of the denotations for the word ‘monster,’ namely “a thing of extraordinary or daunting size” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Secondly, we consider the etymology of the word ‘monster,’ which Natalie Lawrence argues as having originated from Latin *monstrare*, ‘to demonstrate’ and *monere*, ‘to warn’ (Lawrence, 2015). In a similar vein, Jeffery Cohen (1996, p. 4) considers the Latin *monstrum*, meaning to reveal, which partly forms his monster theory, a proposal of seven theses toward “understanding culture through the monsters they bear”. We adapt Cohen’s Thesis I, that “the monster’s body is a cultural body” (1996, p. 4), in our thinking of maternal monstrosity and in analysing Deruma and her actions.

In Thesis I, the monstrous body “incorporates fear, desire, anxiety... signifying something other than itself” (Cohen, 1996, p.4). The monster is in a constant state of becoming, always in between intervals of being created and being born again (Cohen, 1996). It embodies a “certain cultural moment—of a time, a feeling, and a place” (1996, p. 4). For this paper, the term, culture, refers to a person’s lived experience, or ways of living. Cohen’s Thesis I informs us the idea of maternal monstrosity, which is proposed as a state of ontological becoming. It is a process that incorporates the Mother’s lived experience and further ontological formations, creating a sense of culture in terms of her ways of living. The Mother’s body and all she does as a mother embody not just her role with her child, but also confirm her sense of self. When an incident negates her motherhood, which is central to her ontology, the ensuing anxiety of losing her sense of being turns her to a monstrous act, which she performs to reclaim her motherhood and herself.

In adapting Thesis I, Deruma’s ontology is analysed in terms of her actions including body language, speech, and action, and her relationship with Tanggang. We also examine how the narrative structure results in Deruma’s monstrous becoming. These elements are used to examine her process of gradually becoming monstrous when she inflicts the petrification curse on her beloved son at the end of the story. From here, we consider how Deruma’s maternal monstrosity demonstrates and reveals her lived experience within the context of the story.

Kelsey E. Henry (2015, n.p), in her study of mothers in horror films, argues that “mothers are one thing: monsters.” As a principal part of the study focuses on Deruma’s subjectivity as a mother and a woman, the analysis of monstrosity in this paper will be informed by key concepts taken from Maternal Studies, primarily from the works of Adrienne Rich. Rich, who argues that mothering and motherhood are sites of oppression, proposes considerations that are crucial in understanding Deruma’s behaviours. The first consideration centres on motherhood as an institution where patriarchal structures regulate and control the practices of mothering and what motherhood entails. This domination consolidates enduring mythical features of mothering. Firstly, mothering is natural to women and henceforth their sole responsibility, and secondly, the institution of motherhood gives mothers no agency in determining how she executes this

responsibility. These features result in what Sharon Hays (1996, p. 54) calls the concept of intensive mothering, which is “constructed as child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive”. The second consideration proposed by Rich revolves around how, as an experience, motherhood can also be empowering. Rich (1976, p. 280) suggests that destroying this institution does not mean the need to abolish motherhood itself. Instead, motherhood should not be isolating and should be given the same accordance as other experiences such as decision, imagination, and conscious intelligence for it to become an empowering experience.

These two considerations will help inform the analysis of the two phases of mothering in the Tale of Si Tanggang. The first consideration covers the first phase of mothering from the beginning of the tale up to Tanggang’s harsh treatment of his mother. In turn, the second consideration will explore Deruma at the point when she punishes her son at the end of the story.

DERUMA: A TALE OF BECOMING

Owing to the nature of folk stories, details concerning Deruma are scant. Printed versions of the tale are short and straightforward as they are often produced for a very young readership. There are other works inspired by the folktale, such as Muhammad Haji Salleh’s “Si Tanggang’s Homecoming” (1975) and Adifitri Ahmad’s *Taubat Si Tanggang* Series (2015) which chronicles Tanggang’s journey of atonement after he is revived as a monstrous rock creature years after the tale ends. Haji Salleh’s work focuses primarily on Tanggang’s feelings and Ahmad’s graphic novel is an addition to the principal story, and while both are interesting retellings of the tale, they will not be included in this analysis. Both the literary and cinematic versions used here follow the main structure of the folktale and their visual cues available will help in our understanding of the tale as a whole and the dynamics surrounding representations of the Mother in versions of this tale. Deruma’s economic disposition, facial expressions, utterances, and actions, whether described in the textual or cinematic narrative or portrayed in the scenes with the accompanying texts, help provide ample information about how Deruma is portrayed in the tale.

Deruma’s ontological formation is articulated by how she is characterised as a “good” mother from the Malay perspective. She is often all-sacrificing and self-denying, and she loves unconditionally. It is this idea of her that later feeds the gravity and monstrosity of her curse. This popular mothering culture, Shari L. Thurer (1994, p. xi) argues, “implies that our children are exquisitely delicate creatures, hugely vulnerable to our idiosyncrasies and deficits, who require relentless psychological attunement and approval”. Deruma’s nature as a mother is often exemplified through the family’s poor economic disposition. Through poverty, the narrative often highlights the suffering and sacrifice of the parents, to make sure Tanggang is properly fed and taken care of. In *Tanggang* (2014), which is a children’s book, while there is little textual evidence to suggest that Deruma and her husband, Talang live in poverty, there are many visual cues to help bring readers to the understanding that the family is poor. It is only later in the story that this is confirmed textually as Tanggang’s wife, Princess Intan Zulaika, notes that the elderly folk seeking an audience with Tanggang look very poor as she says, “These old folk look very poor. Who are they, my dear?” (Ramsiyah, 2014, p.18). In many versions of the tale, the question posed by his wife is an innocent one and without malice. Often, Tanggang’s response to this question is a sense of embarrassment and shame for his humble roots and his poor parents, unlike those of his wife who is of royal blood. It is this shame that pushes him to denounce his parents.

Illustrations of Deruma in books often signal to the reader how poor she is. Her clothes are old and tattered, with patches sewn where she has fixed them. The 1961 film adaptation of the story exaggerates this point further by portraying Deruma as a dishevelled and struggling single mother, whose efforts to keep her son fed leaves her little time for herself. Deruma is tired-looking and highly dishevelled, even to a point in which she often seems crazed. This exaggerated portrayal of Deruma in the film underscores how, despite her financial limitations and physical capacity, Deruma would do anything to make her son happy. It feeds the idea that, as a mother, she sacrifices so much of herself for her son, to the extent that when he betrays her, the gravity of such an action is felt by the viewers. Understandably, viewers and readers will develop a sense of pathos for Deruma, who despite her efforts to nurture and protect her son, is betrayed in the end. This echoes Rich's concern about the suffering of the Mother:

It is as if the suffering of the mother, the primary identification of woman as the mother — were so necessary to the emotional grounding of human society that the mitigation, or removal, of that suffering, that identification, must be sought at every level, including the level of refusing to question it at all (1976, p. 30).

Deruma's selfless nature is something that is demonstrated often in many, if not, all versions of *Si Tanggang*. Within the domestic space, Deruma is always shown doing domestic tasks such as cooking and cleaning. Deruma is also responsible for nurturing Tanggang's emotional and spiritual needs as she often reminds him to remember God, provides wisdom, and teaches him to read the Quran. This major responsibility is expected of a Malay mother and exemplifies how the Malay family system expects the Mother to be the default parent to her children. This illustrates how motherhood as a phenomenon requires the Mother to be heavily invested in the upbringing of her child (Almond, 2011, p. xiv). At the same time, due to this intensive mothering, Deruma's sense of personhood is often overshadowed by her son's needs, which often become romanticised as a sort of selfless and intensive mothering. This intensive mothering is accentuated in the film by making Deruma a single parent so that all the domestic tasks become her sole responsibility.

Moreover, the film version of *Deruma* is confronted by many social and class challenges that enforce her protectiveness as a mother. When Tanggang is bullied by the local children, for example, Deruma comes to his aid by him from the stones thrown by the other children. Later, when a grown Tanggang forces his mother to convey his intentions to marry Montel to her affluent parents, she does so despite knowing that the request will be rejected due to class differences. Driven by her need to make her son happy, she tells Tanggang, "you're my only son, and I'll do anything, even risk my life for you." Therefore, the sacred/sacrificing position of the Mother is simultaneously demonstrated through the elevated, singular position of the child. As a result, Deruma must endure the public humiliation of that rejection as she is thrown out by Montel's parents and returns home only to confront her son's anguish.

The build-up to this sacred and sacrificing position also regulates how Deruma interacts with others around her. In some published versions of the tale, there is not a lot of interaction between Deruma and Talang (the husband) as the story tends to focus on her relationship with Tanggang. The only husband/wife interaction takes place towards the end when Talang commands Deruma to leave Tanggang and return home after Tanggang humiliates them. With the absence of Talang, perhaps inspired by the Bruneian version of the tale, Deruma mainly interacts with Montel's affluent parents and Tanggang's bullies when he was a child. These interactions, although substantial, simply emphasises Deruma's lack of social status and wealth, which fuel her alienation from society. These interactions further isolate Deruma from meaningful interactions

and relationships with other people. Hence, the sole focus of her daily life revolves around caring for her son. All of these details accumulate to underscore Deruma's sacrifices as a mother and that she excels at the role due to her selflessness.

Hence, the texts are especially didactic, highlighting what William Bascom (1954, pp. 345-346) identifies as the educational and conforming functions of folklore epitomising the unfilial child narrative that is popular in Malay culture (Md. Radzi, 2015, p. 247) as well as the good mother trope. Filial piety is a concept central to the Malay kinship system whereby the child is expected to be obedient and amenable to their parents. Building on Deruma's intensive mothering, Tanggang's refusal to acknowledge his mother is the ultimate betrayal of a child towards his mother, illustrating what Shakespeare says in *The Tempest* on how "good wombs have borne bad sons" (Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 1.2).

Whilst many versions of the tale note that Tanggang spurns both parents, Deruma is the only one who curses him, demonstrating the sacred position of mothers borne out of maternal sacrifices. Through the curse, this sacred position, threatened by the son's arrogance, is reclaimed and remains protected, albeit challenged earlier. Deruma fulfils the cultural imaginaries of mothering in Malay culture, as she perpetuates values that are inherent in it. She is thus shown as a paragon of Malay mothering as the tale is really as much for teaching women about ideal mothering as much as it teaches children about the concept of filial piety.

Deruma, who sacrifices even her own pride and dignity is forced to experience a sense of maternal rage and decides to doom her insolent child. In a sense, her own intensive mothering enables the curse to materialise. It is a liberating act to regain her sense of self and agency, not necessarily just a means to teach her son a lesson as she reclaims a part of herself that was forced aside when she first took on the role of 'mother'. This reclaiming indicates that Deruma's sense of who she is as a person, "arises through a lack of wholeness gained from [her] surroundings" (Syamsina & Ida, 2020, p.115). Deruma's monstrous petrification curse towards Tanggang, who is no longer deemed sacred, gives her temporary relief from strict cultural expectations of doting mothering, which she has embodied all her life to raise Tanggang but could not give her a sense of fulfilling satisfaction from performing that very role. The need to reclaim her sense of self and agency is then demonstrated through Deruma's body as she invokes a higher power to punish him.

Deruma's subjectivities as a mother and woman are often associated with her body. As in many forms of popular culture around the globe, women's bodies are often seen as abject and Other. Seen in this way, it echoes what Cohen argues when it comes to a monster's body, that attitudes concerning the female body reveal much about the culture in which it resides. It shows not only how Deruma's body is mediated in the story but also reveals how power is invested in mothers (Rich, 1976, p.13) and can be used to subvert or challenge patriarchal authority which Tanggang represents. While one version of the story only shows Deruma pleading to God to punish her son, the Mother in Skeat's version of *Charita Megat Sajobang* establishes the link between the Mother's body and the curse: "If thou art really my son, reared at my breast, mayest thou be changed into stone" (Skeat, 1900. p.54). After the prayer, it is said that milk comes forth from her breasts and as she leaves, the son's ship and all of its inhabitants become petrified. Similarly, the film version of Deruma also positions her body as a site of this conflict:

If he is my child, the one whom I had carried for nine months and nine days, the one I had given birth to, breastfed from babe until grown, please show him the punishment for an ungrateful son, for he does not acknowledge that I am his mother. O God, please punish him, punish this ungrateful child." (*Si Tanggang*, 1:56:08-1:56:40)

Instead of positioning the maternal body as Othered, Deruma pushes her body into the realm of agency with the curse as it enables Deruma to reclaim her agency discursively and simultaneously, freeing her body from the burdens of mothering Tanggang. The pronouncement of the curse is instrumental to Deruma's reclamation of agency and sense of self, considering that a "person's existence and their agency are provided by language" since language "provides the framework which enables the subject to express itself" (Judith Butler as cited in Sayyed & Tayyeb, 2018, p.166).

Elements of punishment are prevalent in Malay folktales and usually take the form of curses and catastrophes and are manifested due to feelings of jealousy and the need for revenge. Of the curses that abound in tales around the world, many also focus on petrification and they vary in location, petrified figures, and factors for the curse. One of the most famous Greek mythological figures, Medusa the Gorgon, petrifies those who look into her eyes. Hasan Bugrul identifies some Turkish, Kyrgyz, and Kazakh legends involving petrification from paralysed fear, eternal sleep from exhaustion, and having invoked the wrath of God (Bugrul, 2014, pp. 33-34). Legends such as the Rollright Stones in the UK West Midlands involve a king and his knights being turned into stone by a witch for trespassing her land (Wun, 2008, p. 209). The Cornish "Merry Maidens" and the Continental "Noce de Pierre" legends (Menefee, 1974, p. 23), for example, both involve petrification for the sin of dancing during a sacred occasion, namely on a Sunday and while a religious procession passes by, respectively. The tale of the ferocious caiman of Pasig River in the Philippines, as well as the Tale of the Trung Sisters in Thailand, also bear hallmarks of petrification although they may not necessarily be entangled in the relationship between sin and punishment. In particular, there is a link between Tanggang's fate and the trope of petrification as the consequence of sin. This indicates the universality of this trope but also, the regional and cultural diversity that could result from such representations.

In relation to this, Deruma's sorrow at her son's refusal invokes divine intervention that enables the curse to materialise, indicating that Tanggang's disrespect towards his mother is also a grave sin. The petrification curse demonstrates the profound despair, disappointment, and humiliation that Deruma feels when her own son deems her socially unworthy and embarrassing. Furthermore, it is not only Tanggang who receives such divine punishment. In fact, in many versions of the tale, the curse is of Biblical proportions as it affects his wife, everyone, and all the wealth on board his ship. Once they turn to stone, most versions of the tale tell of how the petrified figures stay visible above the water, as a reminder for all those who see them.

Tanggang's transgression against his mother is a sin, akin to those mentioned above. The rejection also has patriarchal nuances. Now that he is an "income generating" man (Greta Gaard & Lori Gruen, as cited in Pyeaam and Mahboub, 2016, p. 22), all glitter and gold for all the world to see, he deems himself as superior to Deruma, in economic class, gender, and familial terms. As Tanggang rejects Deruma, in that one gesture, he also swiftly dismisses all her invisible "unpaid laborious work" such as raising him almost single-handedly (in some versions) and "preparing food [which] take place in the private sector or home" (Greta Gaard & Lori Gruen, as cited in Pyeaam and Mahboub, 2016, p. 22). More so, Tanggang's rejection of Deruma also suggests what Rich (1976, p.12) believes to be the tendency for the son to "assimilate, compensate for, or deny that he is "of woman born." It marks the point of Deruma becoming a person with monstrous tendencies, a process of ontological formation that is heavily invested in her relationship with her son. The rejection negates her financial and social hardships and invalidates her self-sacrificing in her maternal position while raising Tanggang, resulting in the extraordinary and daunting nature of the divine-enabled petrification curse that she inflicts on Tanggang. The

curse, visible, physical, and exposed in public, immobilises Tanggang, takes away his freedom, and equally invalidates his wealth and achievements, all of which have turned him away from his mother and into an insolent son. Tanggang's rejection and humiliation of his mother undermine and deny Deruma's sense of self, both as a person and a mother. Turning Tanggang into stone does not turn back time for Deruma but the curse strengthens her agency as a person, much like her determination to raise her son, that when humiliated for her shabby and ugly appearance, she resorts to the power of her words in invoking divine wrath to supplement hers. Birkhäuser-Oeri (1988 p.2) in their study of archetypal images of the Mother in fairy tales, supports this idea. They argue that mothers in fairy tales and folk tales are often presented as either more evil or good than actual mothers, and they are often given superhuman or subhuman traits. While Deruma is not bestowed with any of these traits, she is given the power to invoke that curse that is imbued with Divine will to punish her son.

Furthermore, Deruma's expression of the curse reveals her resolution as an individual as she reclaims her motherhood in response to Tanggang's rejection of her. In specifying her body and her breast milk, she and the curse are one entity, exhibiting her maternal rage as the curse takes place. The curse, monstrous as Deruma's revenge and the stone-Tanggang, also didactically, warns readers not only about crossing mothers and women but also of the temporariness of material things. The tale epitomises the enduring quality of the mother-child relationship, of what a mother has the guts to do, for better or worse. Now that Tanggang is set in stone, he has finally returned to his mother and could not hurt or leave her again. Tanggang's act has catalysed the monstrosity of Deruma's curse, which ironically is the only way she has left to salvage what is left of her dignity as a person and as a mother.

On a larger scale, Deruma's punishment can be seen as an act of subversion towards the existing cultural anxiety surrounding women and gender roles in Malay society because ideal womanhood is contingent on how women perform their roles as wives and mothers. These ideals then make their way into Malay cultural imaginaries as exemplified in how local folktales deal with women. "Motherhood," says Abigail L. Paiko (2010, p.1) "is one of those roles that assumes an almost-outsized cultural importance in the significance we force it to bear." Therefore, motherhood then becomes "the source of and the repository for all kinds of cultural fear" (ibid), echoing Cohen's argument in the first thesis. Sharifah Aishah Osman (2018, p.10), in her study of the Legend of Mahsuri, contends that gender stereotyping that appears in many Malay folktales demonstrates the culture's values which are feudalistic and patriarchal, and underscores ideal female representation. Most Malay folk stories featuring female characters illustrate a dichotomous representation of women: how "good" women who are feminine, pure, and attractive pitted against "bad" women who are often shown as vain and wicked. These points to the fact that Deruma evidently does not fit into the neat binary of the good/bad woman bifurcation, despite what she does to her son. Deruma's mothering fulfils the expectations of a mother in Malay culture. At the same time, Deruma's ultimate punishment of Tanggang also subverts this idea of the doting mother by refusing to be forgiving and saintly. Therefore, this act defies the binary taxonomy of good/evil women. Her love is ultimately conditional and reveals to us that Deruma is an agentive figure in the tale. When Tanggang betrays her love and trust, he offends her sense of motherhood and personhood. This grave offense means no punishment can truly compare to her monstrous curse on Tanggang.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, the concept of maternal monstrosity has been discussed by demonstrating Deruma's process of becoming through her actions as Tanggang's Mother and her extraordinary and daunting petrification curse on her son. Cohen's Thesis I of monster culture is adapted and used to analyse Deruma's ontology in relation to Tanggang and how her utmost maternal devotion, when invalidated by Tanggang himself, turns her to a monstrous act. We found that her maternal monstrosity is a state of becoming and more importantly, an empowering, agentive act against Tanggang's insult, enabling her to reclaim her motherhood and herself. The study of Deruma and her curse is timely as currently mothers and various mothering cultures are heavily scrutinised in the Malaysian sociocultural landscape. This can be seen through existing laws forbidding the granting of citizenship to overseas-born children of Malaysian mothers and the ongoing case to overturn them, as well as cases of mothers, especially single mothers, who have been unfairly punished for various crimes. The increasing focus Malaysians put on how mothers' mothering their children is evident by endless social media posts about various ways of "correct" mothering. By examining Deruma, who is arguably one of the most famous mothers in Malay cultural history, the figure of the mother is problematised beyond the confines of the story. It reveals to a patriarchal Malay society of a mother's power and sense of agency. Deruma's maternally monstrous petrification curse, we conclude, not only warns us against offending our mother but more importantly, reveals and demonstrates her dignity and perseverance as a person as she empowers herself against Tanggang's insult and repulse of his poor mother.

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