

‘No Longer Languished in the Periphery of Existence:’ Female Bodies, Emotions, And Malay Folktales

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ABSTRACT

The marginalisation of women in folktales generally exists within the undermined, peripheral female characters. This article takes up this very challenge to revisit and rearticulate such a marginalisation by exploring the representations of the female body through an analysis of recurring emotional patterns. These characters include Mahsuri, Puteri Lindungan Bulan, Puteri Gunung Ledang, Deruma of Si Tanggang, Tanjung of Batu Belah Batu Bertangkep, and Mak Labu of Bawang Merah Bawang Putih. Specifically, this article presents a computational approach to understanding how female characters and subjectivities are portrayed across these narratives. By employing sentiment analysis functions and Robert Plutchik’s Wheels of Emotions, comprising eight fundamental extended degrees of emotions, Malay folktale texts in the English language are processed for word frequency, emotional polarity, and intensity to unveil the palimpsestic depth of women’s depictions involving the human body and sociocultural representations concerning body imagery. By exposing these layered emotional arcs and the ways female characters shift between prized virtues and punitive portrayals, the study reframes inherited narratives and demonstrates sentiment and emotion analysis as powerful tools for uncovering subtle biases and evolving agency in literary traditions.

Keywords: emotions; female characters; folktales; Malays; sentiment analysis

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the portrayal of female characters in selected Malaysian folktales. Departing from traditional studies on Malay folktales, it adopts a computational approach to examine the depiction of women in said folktales, such as *Mahsuri*, *Puteri Lindungan Bulan*, *Puteri Gunung Ledang*, *Si Tanggang*, *Batu Belah Batu Bertangkep*, and *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih*. By employing sentiment analysis, the study reinterprets these narratives to reveal the layered complexity of invigorating and disconcerting emotions experienced by the female characters. While we are aware of existing definitions of terminologies, the following terms and their elaborations are employed in tandem with the focus of this paper. First, folktales are generally defined as local oral traditions that are handed down from one generation to another (Abdul Rahman, 2016). Second, as we shall see later, the computational approach used in this article is understood as the computational examination which catalogues and contrasts each instance where a body or body part is referenced or depicted in the stories (Weingart & Jorgensen, 2013, p. 405). Third, folktales are (re)addressed hitherto because they have almost consistently linked interpretations to cultural and religious modes of existence, including cultural production practices that could extend back over the course of several years (Marengo, 2018). For instance, certain

Malay folktales have transformed to generate certain Islamic principles such as *tawadhu* (humility), *tawakal* (trust in God), *syukur* (gratitude), *taat* (obedience), and *sahabat* (companionship), which function as instruments for fostering moral growth (Hassan & Ramlan, 2023). Among these is the well-known tale of *Sang Kancil*, a clever and cunning mouse deer, which symbolises societal attitudes, particularly the shared discontent of diverse communities with corrupt and unjust rulers. Fourth, female characters as addressed in this paper are selected on the basis of affectivity (most often as a carrier of emotions) and imaginativeness (usually a reconstructive factor) (Dasca, 2018). That is, these issues concerning female characters as selected in this paper may yield potential feelings associated with sensory experiences such as the aesthetics and atmosphere of the environment, which can evoke feelings of joy, nostalgia, sentimentality, or tranquillity (Idrus et al., 2024; Idrus et al., 2025). As such, emotions, more often than not, usually shape and (re)shape these folktales, often with a transforming burden (Abdul Rahman, 2016).

This paper also seeks to explore how female bodies, as portrayed through selected characters, are ‘no longer languished in the periphery of existence.’ This claim aims to re-engage readers and scholars who scrutinise various aspects of femininity and challenge the notion of women's exclusion from narratives of achievement. That is, Malay literary traditions often depict women in oral storytelling as muted figures, lacking the strategic agency typically associated with masculinity. However, we argue that sentiment analysis of female depictions can reveal their potential and essential roles, which may suggest their centrality in the vitality of folktales. Without their presence, these stories risk becoming 'sanitised' and devoid of the emotional richness that conveys the depth of human experience. For example, Malay female figures in historical texts are often depicted as merely silenced, navigating both voluntary and involuntary complicity with male counterparts, a dynamic that raises questions about their agency and well-being (Hashim, 2003). Therefore, in this paper, we aim to demonstrate how computational analysis of female characters in Malay folktales can offer a fresh perspective that bears a rousing contrast with existing studies.

PRELUDE IN INTERLUDE: FOLKTALES IN MALAYSIA

Before exploring how sentiment analysis can illuminate the multifaceted dimensions of female characters in selected folktales, it is important to first offer some investigations of the discourse surrounding Malaysian folktale studies. Fateha and Ramlan (2023) offer a critical examination of the maternal figure of Deruma from the popular folktale, *Si Tanggang*. In their work, Fateha and Ramlan shift the scholarly focus from the commonly analysed pedagogical theme of filial piety to the figure of the mother. In doing so, the authors interrogate how the mother is represented through the foregrounding of the concept of maternal monstrosity. They contend that Deruma's curse is not simply an act of divine punishment but an expression of female agency which has been suppressed by a patriarchal Malay culture. Drawing upon Jeffrey Cohen's Monster Theory, particularly the first thesis, which underscores how the monster's body is a cultural body, the authors interpret Deruma's curse, strengthened through her articulation of her maternal body, as a powerful act of agency. Consequently, this article disrupts traditional binaries of the “good” and “bad” mother in Malay folktales and encourages the reading of the tale as a subversive response to societal gender expectations.

Hassan and Ramlan (2023) examine the depictions of gender and femininity in film adaptations of *Puteri Gunung Ledang*. Their analysis of *Puteri Gunung Ledang* (2004) and *Magika* (2010) explores the shifting representations of female agency. While *Puteri Gunung Ledang*

attempts to illustrate the maintenance of the protagonist's strength, it often relegates her to traditional gender roles. *Magika*'s comedic interpretation diminishes the protagonist's character, reinforcing Western stereotypes of passivity and submissiveness; *Magika*, as Hassan and Ramlan (2023) summarise, replicates "the characterisations of Western folktales, which bring back Grimms' passive heroine trope in the narrative" (p.82). Seen in one way, these depictions raise consciousness about the role of contemporary media in legitimate representations of historical female figures and cultural heritage. Yet, we are also cognisant that, as much as Hassan and Ramlan (2023) demonstrate a keen engagement with female characters' depictions, computational work through sentiment analysis, sadly, has been 'sanitised.' In the following pages, our aim, therefore, is to depart from existing investigations by presenting the exaltation of female characters' portrayals in selected folktales, seen in one way, departing from conventional and available studies on folktales.

THE FOLKTALES

The selection of folktales in the Southeast Asian literary worlds might be seen from the plot, value, and belief specifics belonging to these folktales themselves. First, *Mahsuri* is a tragic tale of love, jealousy, and injustice. Mahsuri, a beautiful and virtuous woman from Langkawi, married a warrior named Wan Derus. During her husband's absence, envious villagers, led by her mother-in-law, falsely accused her of adultery. Despite her innocence, Mahsuri was sentenced to death. Before dying, she cursed Langkawi to endure seven generations of hardship. Her blood, said to be white, revealed her purity, and her unjust fate became a powerful reminder of the consequences of jealousy and false accusations (Perret, 2007). Second, *Puteri Gunung Ledang* recounts the story of a mystical princess who resides atop Gunung Ledang, also known as Mount Ophir, located in modern-day Johor. She is renowned for her exceptional beauty and purported supernatural abilities, thus becoming the object of desire for Sultan Mahmud of Melaka. He dispatches emissaries to convey to the princess his intent to marry her, but the princess sets seven impossible conditions for the Sultan. These demands are seemingly impossible to achieve, but the Sultan manages to fulfil six of the demands. The final condition, which is to gift her a bowl containing the blood of the Sultan's son, was something the Sultan could not bring himself to do, and thus he abandons his pursuit of Puteri Gunung Ledang (Muhammad Haji Salleh, 2018).

Third, *Si Tanggang* is a famous tale throughout the Malay Archipelago, with various versions of it found in modern-day Malaysia, Indonesia (Malin Kundang), and Brunei (Nakhoda Manis). Whilst the tale is more popularly known as *Si Tanggang* in Malaysia, this study includes a version included in Skeat's *Malay Magic* (1901), which is "Charitra Megat Sajubong." The titular character, born into a poor family, becomes the sole caretaker of his sickly mother after his father's death. Driven by ambition, he joins a ship docked near his village with his mother's blessing, vowing to return wealthy. Through hard work, Tanggang gains the favour of the ship's owner, eventually becoming the captain and marrying the owner's daughter. Years later, his ship docks at his home village. When his mother comes to see him, Tanggang denies and mistreats her, ashamed to acknowledge her as his mother. Heartbroken, she curses him, and by divine will, Tanggang and everyone aboard his ship are turned into stone (Aboo Backer, 2019). Finally, *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih*, as a folktale, tells the stories of two stepsisters, Bawang Merah and Bawang Putih. After Bawang Putih's mother dies, her father remarries, and Bawang Putih is mistreated by her cruel stepmother and the selfish Bawang Merah. Bawang Putih endures her

hardships with patience and kindness. One day, she helps a magical fish or spirit, which rewards her with riches and good fortune. Jealous, Bawang Merah and her mother attempt to replicate her actions but fail due to their greed and arrogance, resulting in misfortune. Eventually, Bawang Putih's virtues win her a happy ending, often involving marriage to a nobleman, while Bawang Merah and her mother face the consequences of their cruelty. The story emphasises the values of kindness, humility, and patience (Ilahi & Satkunananthan, 2023).

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN

The study described here aims to examine representations of women's bodies through a study of sentiment associated with how women's bodies are represented in several popular Malay folktales. Specifically, the study focuses on the collection and analysis of adjectives used to describe female characters to uncover underlying cultural and societal perceptions about the female body. The use of this design is appropriate because the design integrates textual analysis with computational sentiment analysis. The data for this study is a sample of 5 separate retellings of 4 popular Malay folktales. The sample contains texts from well-known folktale authors such as Ninot Aziz and Heidi Shamsuddin, including retellings published in children's storybooks and blogs. As summarised in Table 1, English texts were analysed.

TABLE 1. List of texts used in the paper and their details of publication

Folktale Title	Authors	Source of publication
Mahsuri	Ezreen Ku En Yi & Nur Farzana Izzati binti Shahrudin	The legend of Mahsuri (2012), https://ezreena.wixsite.com/malaysian-folktales/the-legend-of-mahsuri
	Ninot Aziz	Legend: Mahsuri (2013), https://ahikayataday.blogspot.com/2013/09/ssnc-hikayat-day-legend-mahsuri.html
	Mori Lim	<i>The Legend of Mahsuri</i> (2017), Kualiti Books Sdn. Bhd.
	Kathrynwp	The legend of the Mahsuri Curse – Langkawi (2024), https://chronicallyillkat.com/2024/04/18/the-legend-of-the-mahsuri-curse-langkawi/
	Naturally Langkawi	Legend of Mahsuri, https://naturallylangkawi.my/about-langkawi/myth-and-legends/
Puteri Gunung Ledang	Zainal-'Abidin Ahmad	"Some Malay Legendary Tales" (1951, pp. 85), <i>Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, Volume 24, No. 1</i>
	Ninot Aziz	<i>From the Written Stone: An Anthology of Malaysian Folklore</i> (2006, pp. 1-7), Utusan Publications
	Muhammad Haji Salleh	<i>The Genealogy of Kings: Sulalat Al-Salatin</i> (2018, pp. 139-141), Penguin Random House SEA
	Maslina Md. Nor	<i>Puteri Gunung Ledang</i> (2018), MPH Publishing
Bawang Putih. Bawang Merah	Leela Chakrabarthi	<i>The Principal Girl: Feminist Tales from Asia</i> (2019, pp. 33-43), Gerakbudaya
	J. Yasodhara Menon	"A study of archetypal patterns in selected Malaysian folktales" (2009, pp. 33), <i>Sarjana, Volume 24, No. 1</i>
	Rubiah Jusoh	<i>Bawang Merah Bawang Putih</i> (2017), Kualiti Books Sdn. Bhd.

	Ruhaida Abdullah	<i>Bawang Putih & Bawang Merah</i> (2020), Baba baa Books
	Heidi Shamsuddin	<i>Nusantara: A Sea of Tales</i> (2021, pp. 118-122), Penguin Random House SEA
	Author in Wikipedia	<i>Bawang Merah Bawang Putih – The story</i> (Second version), https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bawang_Merah_Bawang_Putih
Si Tanggang (also known as Charitra Megat Sajobang)	Walter William Skeat	<i>Malay Magic: Being an Introduction to the Folklore and Popular Religion of the Malay Peninsula</i> (1900, pp. 54-55), Macmillan and Co., Limited
	K. Gurunathan	<i>Si Tanggang and the Ungrateful Son</i> (2004), Kohwai & Young Publication
	Ramsiyah Amir	<i>Tanggang</i> (2014), Institut Terjemahan & Buku Malaysia Berhad
	Heidi Shamsuddin	<i>Nusantara: A Sea of Tales</i> (2021, pp. 1182-117), Penguin Random House SEA
	Mel Lia	<i>Si Tanggang the Ungrateful Son</i> [Video], https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=06o7j-7Z2a8

DATA ANALYSIS

These lexical items are run through a tool called Voyant, a web-based text analysis application designed for digital humanities and scholarly research. It is used to show how word frequency changes over time within a text or corpus of text and the frequency of specific tokens, respectively. By generating commonly used adjectives in selected folktales, collocation and Keyword-in-Context (KWIC) analyses are carried out. To use Voyant, the texts are made machine-readable by two processes. Firstly, the five text files are generated from scanned folklore texts. Secondly, these text files are subsequently scanned using Optical Character Recognition (OCR) so that content from PDF files is encoded and made machine-readable. These initial stages of using Voyant determine the most frequently used descriptors, shedding light on the prevalent lexical choices.

The discussion of findings is structured into two main components. The first component focuses on sentiment analysis, which examines the positive, neutral, and negative valences of adjectives associated with female characters. The second component focuses on emotion analysis, which maps these adjectives to basic emotions using Plutchik's Wheel of Emotion and the NRC Emotion Lexicon. This two-component structure provides a framework for interpreting how cultural perceptions are embedded in the selected narratives. The mapping of the emotional valence uses Plutchik's Wheel of Emotion and the NRC Emotion Lexicon (EmoLex). EmoLex is a lexicon that associates 14,000 English words with eight basic emotions and two sentiments (positive and negative). Even though Plutchik's Wheel of Emotion presents up to 32 varying degrees of emotions, this study only utilises eight basic emotions: joy, trust, fear, surprise, sadness, disgust, anger, and anticipation, as seen in Figure 1:

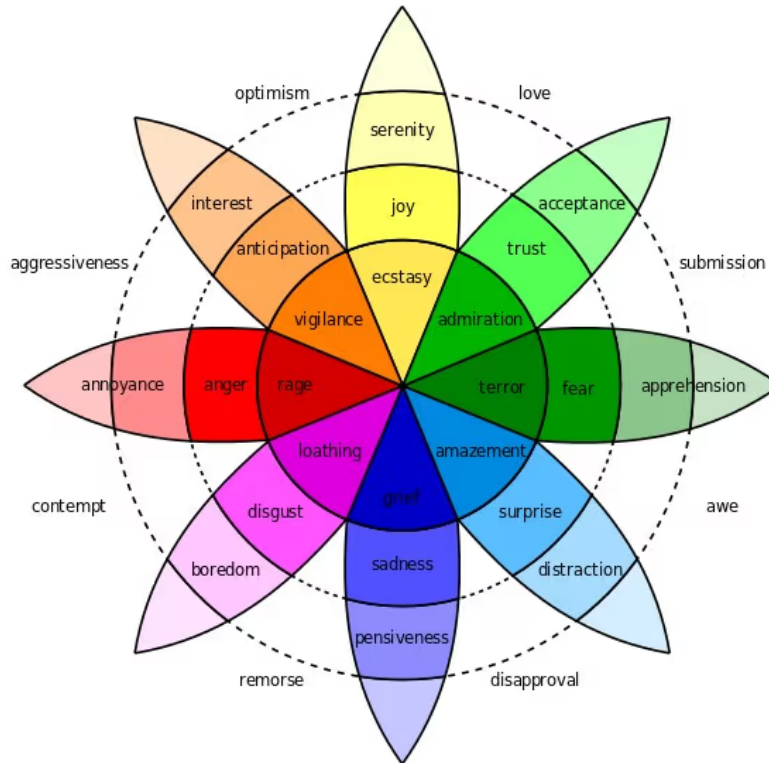


FIGURE 1. Plutchik's Wheel of Emotions. The study refers to 8 basic emotions illustrated by the second innermost ring. (Safont et al., 2019)

In Figure 1, individual themes are aligned to the dominant emotions from Plutchik's Wheel and EmoLex to understand whatever cultural implications they may suggest. This allows for a systematic mapping of adjectives used to describe female characters to underlying emotional tones. The interpretation of emotional patterns, adjectives identified through Voyant and cross-referenced with EmoLex, are organised into five categories based on recurring patterns of bodily representations as presented in Table 2:

TABLE 2. Categories adapted from Gilbert and Gubar (1979), Kristeva (1982), and Bordo (1993)

Beauty, Fragility, and Passivity
Age and Decay
Sexuality
Purity and Virtue
Monstrous/Grotesque

These five adapted categories, which are provided in Table 2, are examined for their implied views because adjectives are often emotionally charged and carry within them specific cultural attitudes that generally signify practices. To examine how adjectives are used is to understand the meaning-making and how societies make sense of the world around them.

ANALYSIS

THE FEMALE BODY IN MAHSURI AND PUTERI GUNUNG LEDANG

CULTURAL ENCODINGS OF THE FEMALE BODY

How each culture encodes and presents its perspectives about the body is different. This is especially so when it comes to the female body and how society attributes meaning to it. More often than not, these associated meanings control the identities that are forced onto women. We consider four functions of folklore (Bascom, 1965): folklore validates a culture, educates, and maintains conformity. In many retellings of these folktales, Mahsuri and Puteri Gunung Ledang are often portrayed as embodying the image of beautiful women. Their infamous beauty attracts the male gaze, specifically the Sultan of Melaka in the case of Puteri Gunung Ledang. Laura Mulvey correlates the male gaze by connoting women with “*to-be-looked-at-ness*” manifested from their “traditional exhibitionist role” (1988, p. 62). Mulvey’s correlation corresponds to the retellings of *Mahsuri* and *Puteri Gunung Ledang*, as many of the adjectives concerning Mahsuri and Puteri Gunung Ledang centralise on their appearances (see Table 3 and Figure 2).

TABLE 3. Mahsuri and Puteri Gunung Ledang’s adjectives in the five respective retellings

Character	Text no.	Adjectives
Mahsuri	1	<i>beautiful, polite, personable, gentle, pregnant, unfaithful, faithfully, innocent</i>
	2	<i>lovelier, gentle, honourable, disturbed, unfaithfulness, heavy with child, innocence, calmly</i>
	3	<i>beautiful, sad, alone, not being faithful, innocent</i>
	4	<i>beauty, warm, friendly, firm, guilty, innocent</i>
	5	<i>beautiful, young</i>
Puteri Gunung Ledang (PGL)	1	<i>elusive, fluid, unaffected by time or age, beautiful, young, middle-aged, grey-haired, ancient, bent, ugly, repulsive-looking, extraordinary, famous, wrinkled, energetic, quite willing</i>
	2	<i>most beautiful, lovelier, more mystical, mysterious, recluse, banished, changeling, royal, infinite sadness, suffered greatly, solemn</i>
	3	<i>more lovely, lovelier, magnificent, old, very good-looking, extremely bent</i>
	4	<i>beautiful, elven, old, gracefully</i>
	5	<i>beauty, spirit, strength, grace (“inherited her mother’s beauty and spirit and her father’s strength and grace”), magical, deeply uneasy, grieving, strong, beautiful, centuries old, familiar, enchanted, forever immortal, enchanting, young, grown, hunched, old</i>



FIGURE 2. Visualised word frequency in *Mahsuri* and *Puteri Gunung Ledang* retellings

Table 3 demonstrates that the adjectives associated with Mahsuri and Puteri Gunung Ledang are relatively similar in terms of how their physical appearances are described. This suggests that the different adjectives possessed by the two characters are due to differing personal circumstances between a married woman and a woman who is reluctant to marry. As a married woman, the adjectives associated with Mahsuri concern her fidelity and maternity, underscored by the use of the words *'faithful'* and *'pregnant'*. Figure 2 shows a visualisation of word frequency for adjectives used to describe Mahsuri and Puteri Gunung Ledang in the five respective retellings. The visualisation on Mahsuri shows that the largest and most prominent word is “mahsuri,” thus indicating its highest frequency in the corpus. Other frequently occurring words include “langkawi,” “wan,” “village,” “island,” “curse,” “death,” and “husband.” These reflect the central elements of the narrative, which are her location, relationships, and tragic fate. Words like “siamese,” “warrior,” and “generations” also appear, pointing to historical and cultural information within the retellings. The visualisation of word frequency in Puteri Gunung Ledang shows that the most frequent words are “princess,” “tun,” “sultan,” and “ledang,” thus demonstrating the key characters and setting. Words such as “melaka,” “mamat,” “mountain,” “palace,” “gold,” and “seven” reflect significant plot points in the folktale. Therefore, the adjective *'beautiful'* is used repeatedly in the retellings when describing Mahsuri and Puteri Gunung Ledang. Although Ninot Aziz (*Mahsuri* Text 2) and Muhammad Haji Salleh (*PGL* Text 3) do not bear a rousing contrast, they both describe Mahsuri and Puteri Gunung Ledang using the adjectives *'lovely'* (Muhammad, 2018, p. 139), or *'lovelier'* (Ninot, 2013, para. 2), which equate with the similar descriptive function of *'beautiful.'*

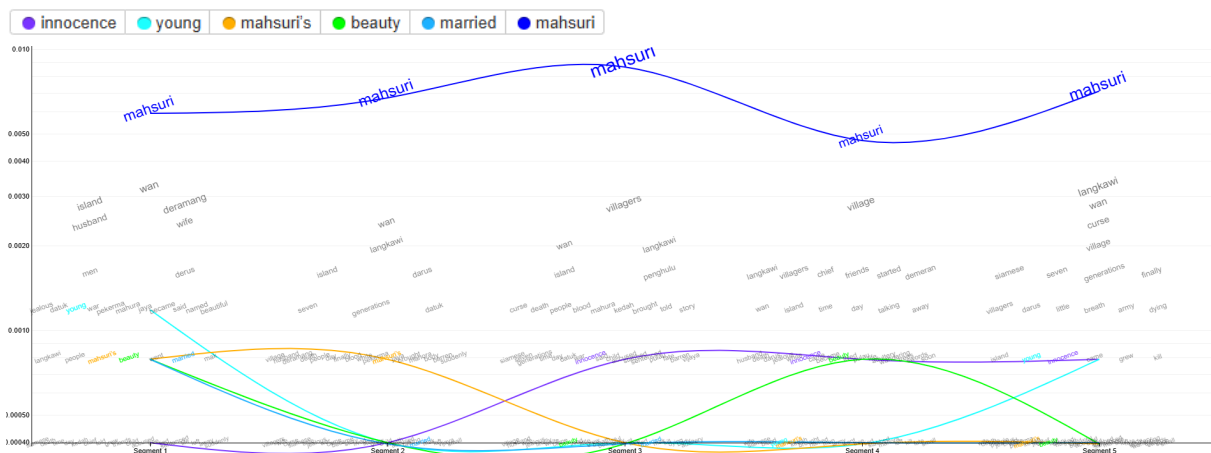


FIGURE 3. The changing frequency of words associated with Mahsuri in *Mahsuri* retellings

Figure 3 tracks the changing frequency of key words associated with Mahsuri across different segments of her retellings. It shows "mahsuri" as consistently dominant while terms like "wan," "accused," "guilty," and "innocent" rise and fall in prominence. These fluctuations reflect the narrative's emotional arc, with negative descriptors peaking during moments of accusation and positive ones resurging upon the vindication of her innocence. This mirrors the shifts from trust to disgust and back to trust identified in the sentiment analysis.

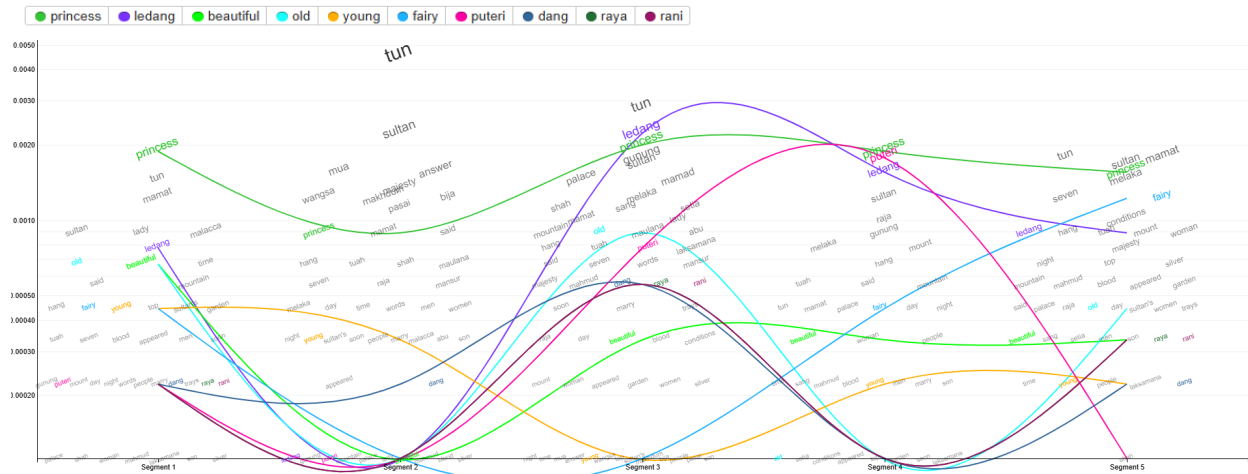


FIGURE 4. The changing frequency of words associated with Puteri Gunung Ledang in *Puteri Gunung Ledang* retellings

TABLE 4. Sentiment of adjectives describing Mahsuri and Puteri Gunung Ledang

Adjectives Sentiment		
Positive	Neutral	Negative
<i>beautiful/good-looking, calmly, enchanting, energetic, extraordinary, faithful, familiar, famous, firm, friendly, gentle, gracefully, grown, honourable, immortal/ unaffected by time or age, innocent, lovely, magical, magnificent, personable, polite, royal, solemn, spirit, strong, willing, young</i>	<i>alone, ancient/old /grey-haired, changeling, elven, fluid, mysterious, mystical, recluse, wrinkled</i>	<i>banished, bent/hunched, disturbed, elusive, grieving, guilty, pregnant/ heavy with child, repulsive-looking, sad, suffered, ugly, deeply uneasy, unfaithful/not being faithful</i>

However, this might suggest that the descriptions of Mahsuri and Puteri Gunung Ledang in the retellings fall within the male gaze, presenting them as what Mulvey (1988, p. 62) terms an “erotic object for the characters,” central points presented in Figure 4 and Table 4. In the retellings of *Puteri Gunung Ledang*, she is desired by the Sultan because of her unparalleled beauty. Mahsuri, however, does not seem to fall within this frame of an erotic object, even though her beauty becomes the catalyst of her death; her beautiful appearance elicits envy from women, particularly Wan Mahora. Kathrynwp (2024), author of Mahsuri Text 4, who has written extensively on the folktale in her blog, explains:

All the time, the eagle-eyed and jealous Wan Mahora, wife of the village chief, was watching. She had always been jealous of Mahsuri's fame and beauty. So, knowing exactly how villages work, she started talking to her friends about Demeran and Mahsuri. And they started talking to their friends, who started talking to their friends.

Wan Mahora's jealousy of Mahsuri's beauty leads her to accuse Mahsuri of infidelity and defame her; at this point, positive adjectives are changed into negative ones, such as *'unfaithful'* and *'guilty'*. Mahsuri, being *'unfaithful,'* shifts her character from being ideal to becoming an erotic object of desire as she is accused of adultery while her husband is away. In this context, Mahsuri is still treated as an object of desire even as a married woman, and this treatment culminates in a negative outcome for the character. The choice of adjective implies that after her accusation, Mahsuri's image is diminished and results in what Mulvey refers to as "the guilty object" (1988, p. 64). It is for this reason that her reputation as an ideal Malay beauty is damaged as she ends up relying on male validation to prove her innocence. We can deduce that many of the retellings position Mahsuri's innocence within the hands of the village chief, who is also Wan Mahora's husband. In this context, Mahsuri is an "icon" that is positioned as inferior to men who are "asserting control and subjecting the guilty people through punishment or forgiveness" (Mulvey, 1988, p. 64). This is similar to Puteri Gunung Ledang, when in one retelling she is ordered to be *'banished'* by the Sultan for rejecting his proposal. In these circumstances, Puteri Gunung Ledang is also seen as "the guilty object" by the Sultan, who Mulvey refers to as "the representative of power" (1988, p. 63).

PREGNANCY AND THE "UNCONTAINED" FEMALE BODY

As for Muhammad (2011), adjectives such as *'pregnant'* or *'heavy with child'*, which are imbued with negative sentiment, degrade women solely because of these physiological processes of pregnancy. The negative sentiment associated with pregnancy not only points to the male-centric gender hierarchy in Malay society but also perhaps a sort of cultural anxiety towards pregnancy, underscoring the idea that the pregnant female body is uncontained. This is because the pregnant body is in a state of transformation and expansion, which can be interpreted as 'uncontained'. Such transformation can elicit various responses from society, ranging from reverence, awe, disgust and even a combination of all these emotions. This uncontained nature of the pregnant body often leads to attempts by society to control and define it. In the case of Malay legends and folk stories, pregnancy and motherhood have always oscillated between the ideal and the monstrous, demonstrated by folkloric figures such as the Langsuir. For Mahsuri, the negative sentiment associated with 'pregnancy' might stem from her accusation of infidelity, which disrupts the social order. This accusation makes society deem her unfit as a woman and as an expecting mother, although, as the receiver of the story, her innocence prevails, which, interestingly, is also demonstrated through another indicator of the leaky female body, blood.

Additionally, many writers use adjectives with negative sentiments to describe an aversion to age and ugliness. This can be seen in the case of Dang Raya Rani, who is described in multiple retellings as *'old'*, *'bent/hunched'*, *'repulsive-looking'*, and *'ugly'*. The word *'old'* is generally a term with neutral sentiment, but when used to describe physical appearance, it takes on negative sentiment. Sentiment surrounding old female bodies is complex. In many folktales and fairytales, old age is often associated with villainy and ugliness, often a direct contrast with the figure of the young and beautiful heroine. With regard to the story of Puteri Gunung Ledang, this contrast is intriguing because retellings of the story tend to include the character in two different roles. On the one hand, some retellings position Dang Raya Rani as a sort of guardian or mentor to Puteri

Gunung Ledang. On the other hand, the character Puteri Gunung Ledang shapeshifts into Dang Raya Rani, making them the same person.

DANG RAYA RANI / NENEK KEBAYAN: REVERENCE AND MARGINALISATION

All reiterations of Dang Raya Rani do not conform to the archetype of the villainous old woman, and she is instead characterised as a wise old woman. This is demonstrated in Ninot's retelling of the tale (PGL Text 2), where we can assume the Nek Kebayan to refer to Dang Raya Rani due to the description of being a double-bent old woman, calling her the "wizened old Nek Kebayan" (2006, p. 3). Despite her nurturing disposition, her bodily appearance is still described in a negative manner. Dang Raya Rani/Nenek Kebayan, described as wiser than villainous and threatening, foregrounds Malay culture's respect for older people. Yet, her physical appearance is still subject to harsh descriptions. This contrast showcases the recurring tension in cultural representations of elderly women. They may be revered for their wisdom and experience, but their ageing bodies continue to be framed negatively and are a cause for discomfort or revulsion. This dual representation (of what might be the same character) encourages a more critical reading of the tale. Here, the analysis suggests that the veneration of age still comes alongside aesthetic and gendered biases. In positioning Dang Raya Rani/Nek Kebayan as revered and marginalised, retellings of the story might reinforce societal ambivalence towards elderly women, where they are respected due to their function in society but stigmatised for how they look. Consequently, the tale of Puteri Gunung Ledang affirms cultural values about wisdom but exposes lingering discomfort about ageing women's bodies.

EMOTIONS IN *PUTERI GUNUNG LEDANG* AND *MAHSURI*

The key difference between sentiment analysis and emotion analysis lies in the depth and granularity of what is being detected. In the previous section, the analysis focused on whether a sentiment associated with a particular adjective is either negative, positive, or neutral. In this section, how specific emotions are expressed are identified. It must be noted that these emotions are still associated with any of the three sentiments. Similar to their sentiment analysis, Puteri Gunung Ledang and Mahsuri tend to express more positive than negative emotions. They mainly express feelings of 'joy' and 'trust' which derive from the positive adjectives such as '*young*', '*friendly*', '*magnificent*', and '*faithful*'. To examine emotions in the texts, the study refers to Plutchik's Wheel of Emotions as presented in Figure 5:

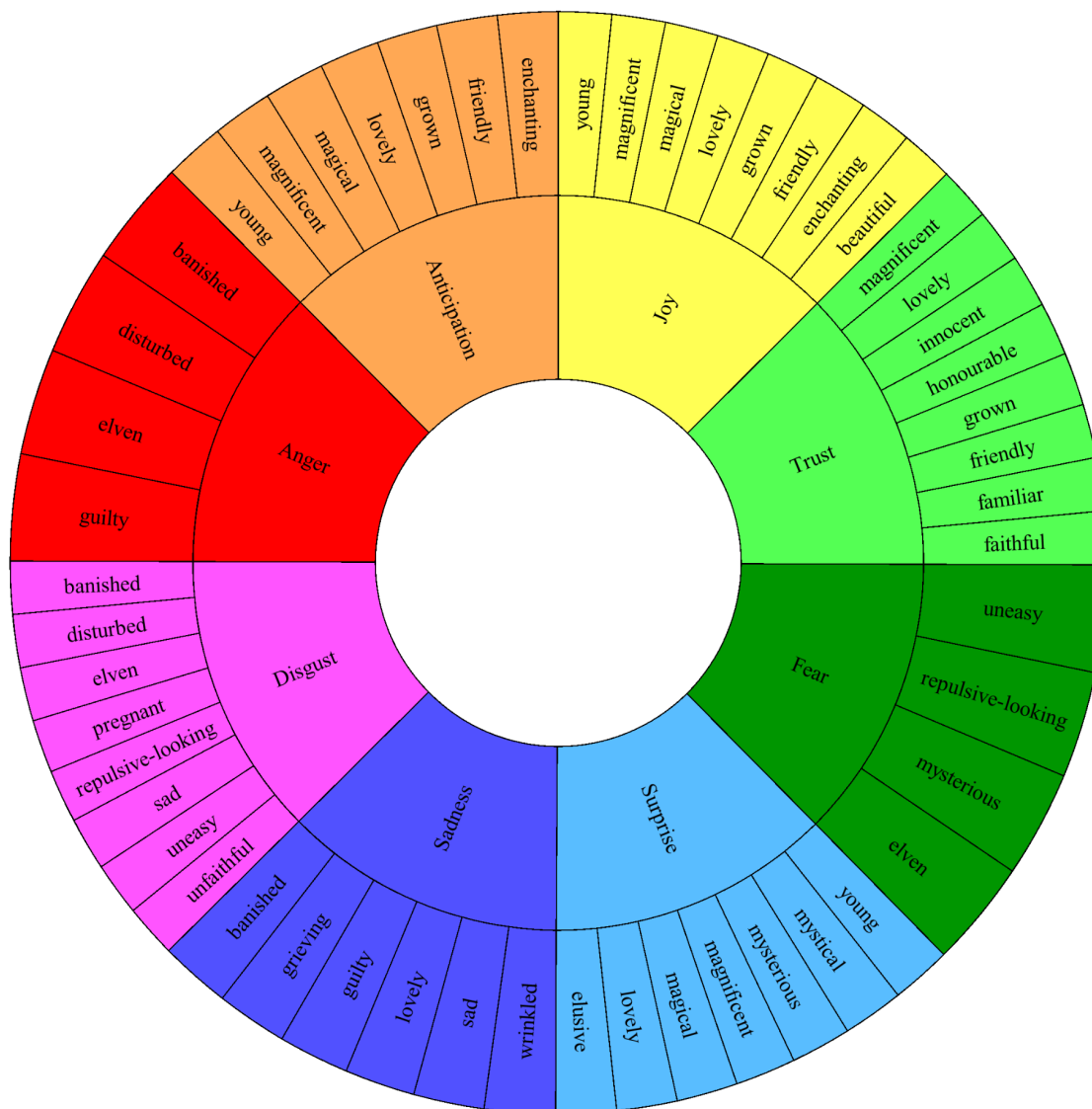


FIGURE 5. Emotion sentiments on Mahsuri's and Puteri Gunung Ledang's adjectives based on Plutchik's *Wheel of Emotions*

As shown in Figure 5, most adjectives which appear in the retellings of Mahsuri and Puteri Gunung Ledang appear to be positive ones, such as 'Joy' and 'Trust', as well as neutral emotions, such as 'Surprise' and 'Anticipation'. Plutchik states that 'Surprise' and 'Anticipation' are associated with neutrality because both are opposites; one implies that it is unpredictable, while the other is predictable (1980, p. 16).

Where it concerns negative emotions, 'Disgust' records the highest frequency among the negative emotions. It is articulated through adjectives such as '*repulsive looking*' (pp. 85) and '*wrinkled*' (pp. 86), which appear in Zainal-'Abidin Ahmad's retelling of Puteri Gunung Ledang (1951), particularly to describe the titular character when she is disguised as Dang Raya Rani. Intriguingly, the adjective '*wrinkled*' is associated with 'Sadness', perhaps because it is an indicator of old age, especially due to loss (Plutchik, 1980, p. 25). In this case, the loss of youth. Undisguised as Puteri Gunung Ledang, the adjectives then take on a positive value due to descriptions of her unparalleled beauty. This is similar to how Mulvey views women as "the active controller(s) of

the look" (Mulvey, 1988, p. 64), pointing to how this description of women in this way serves as a foil to "the male gaze." However, there are adjectives related to age and decay, other than 'wrinkled', that cannot be associated with any one emotion and therefore remain unclassified.

TABLE 5. Adjectives of Puteri Gunung Ledang and Mahsuri that are unclassified as emotion

Adjectives with Unclassified Emotion
<i>calmly, bent/hunched, changeling, energetic, extraordinary, famous, fluid, gentle, gracefully, immortal/unaffected by time and age, personable, polite, royal, solemn, spirit, strong, willing, old/ancient/grey-haired</i>

As presented in Table 5, different from the adjective 'wrinkled', 'bent/hunched', 'immortal/unaffected by time and age' and 'old/ancient/grey-haired' are identified as unclassified emotions. Based on this data, it can be inferred that EmoLex considers the process of ageing as normal and context-contingent; thus, it does not associate with any specific emotion.

In *Puteri Gunung Ledang* and *Mahsuri*, the two folktales' retellings document different shifts of emotions. In *Mahsuri*, the retellings shift from positive to negative, ultimately ending with positive emotions. For instance, in Text 2 of *Mahsuri*, Ninot portrays Mahsuri as an 'honourable' (2013, para. 4) woman, who secures 'Trust' from the village people. However, her honourable image is tarnished when she is branded as 'unfaithful' by Wan Mahora, changing the 'Trust' of the people into a sense of 'Disgust' about Mahsuri's alleged affair. At the end of Text 1, the emotion reverts to 'Trust' as Mahsuri is revealed to be 'innocent' (Ezreen Ku En Yi & Nur Farzana Izzati binti Shaharuddin, 2012; Kathrynwp, 2024) due to the white blood that spills out of her body. The white blood points to Mahsuri's innocence and the injustice she experiences. Different from *Mahsuri*, *Puteri Gunung Ledang* retellings begin with positive emotions and end with negative emotions. The mythical princess is described as 'beautiful' (Zainal-'Abidin, 1951, p. 85; Ninot, 2006, p. 1; Maslina, 2018, p. 1; Chakrabarthy, 2019, p. 36) and 'lovely' (Muhammad, 2018, p. 139), which EmoLex interprets as 'Joy'. But her emotion shifts significantly into 'Disgust' following the Sultan's order to 'banish(ed)' Puteri Gunung Ledang for rejecting his marriage proposal, as seen in Ninot's retelling (2006, p. 2).

THE MOTHER FIGURE AND SENTIMENT IN *BAWANG PUTIH*, *BAWANG MERAH* AND *SI TANGGANG*

As minor characters, Mak Labu from *Bawang Putih*, *Bawang Merah* and Si Deruma from *Si Tanggang* are not represented as much as the titular characters of their stories, and *Puteri Gunung Ledang* and *Mahsuri*, as illustrated in Figures 5 and 6. In the retellings, instances where Mak Labu and Si Deruma are often characterised as straightforward and simple. This is evidenced by the relatively smaller number of adjectives used to describe them. Figures 6 and 7 document the different adjectives used to describe the two characters, respectively.

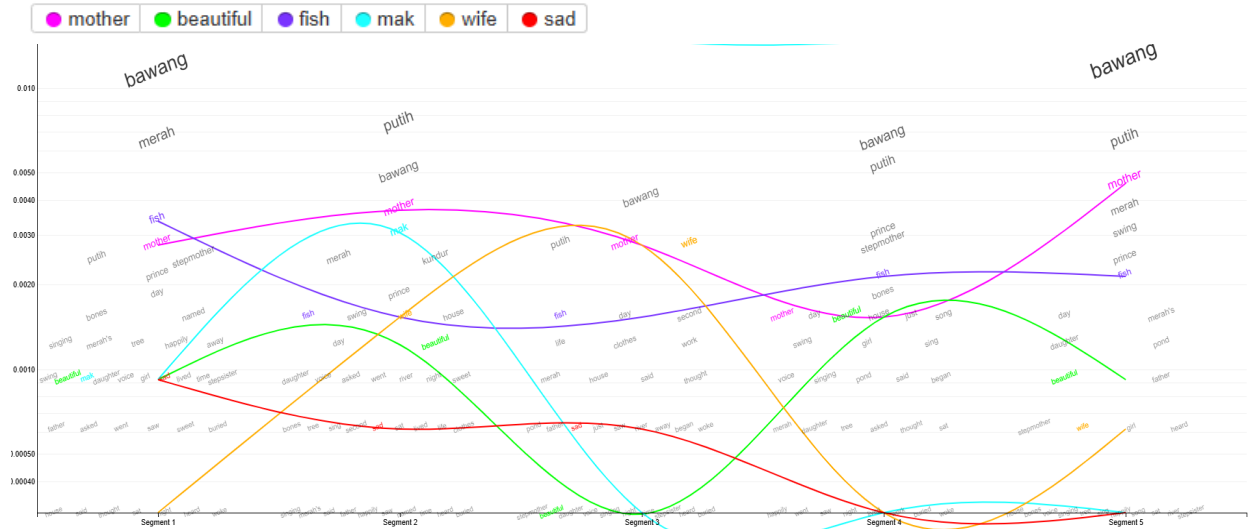


FIGURE 6. The changing frequency of words associated with Mak Labu in *Bawang Putih* and *Bawang Merah* retellings

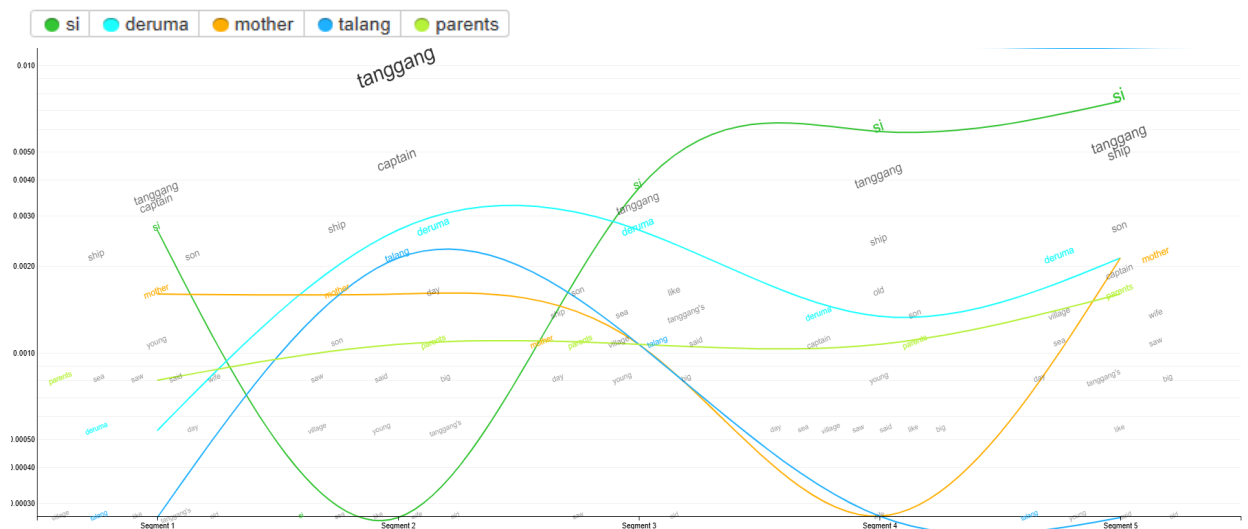


FIGURE 7. The changing frequency of words associated with Si Deruma in *Si Tanggang* retellings

TABLE 6. Mak Labu's and Si Deruma's adjectives in the five respective retellings

Character	Text no.	Adjectives
Mak Labu	1	<i>ill, passes away</i>
	2	<i>passed away</i>
	3	-
	4	<i>kind, gentle, beloved, golden (fish), magical (fish), source of comfort</i>
	5	<i>(dies) prematurely, biological</i>
Si Deruma	1	<i>married, ready, old, wept</i>
	2	<i>shocked, joy, sad, (cried out) loudly</i>
	3	<i>sad, sobbed, happy, poor, old, heartbroken, brokenhearted</i>
	4	<i>true, deep mistrust, poor, (like the) wealthiest, unhappy, old, weathered face(s)</i>
	5	<i>poor, happy, simple, sadly, swollen (eyes)</i>

As can be seen in Table 6, not much can be derived about their bodies. For instance, in Text 2, of *Bawang Putih, Bawang Merah* retelling, Rubiah Jusoh (2017) uses only one adjective, “passed away” in describing Mak Labu. This is because, unlike the other retellings, which portray Mak Labu as the magical fish, Rubiah writes about Mak Labu and the magical fish as separate characters. Meanwhile, the association of Mak Labu with the magical fish is present even in Text 3, although the author does not use any adjective to describe Mak Labu, as Ruhaida Abdullah (2020) wrote,

"Putih, I was pushed into the river. If you miss me, go to the riverbank and call my name. I will appear."
The next day, Bawang Putih went to the riverbank
Suddenly, a gourami fish appeared and swam to Putih.
Putih felt so happy. Every day, Putih brought rice with yam in a coconut shell for her mother. Putih enjoyed spending time by the riverbank talking to her mother.
Unfortunately, Bawang Merah found out what Putih was doing and told her mother about it. This angered Mak Kundur, who then killed the fish. Bawang Putih was very upset when her mother did not appear as usual

(pp. 9-13)

In the case of Deruma from Si Tanggong, the lack of adjectives describing her is perhaps not surprising, as a number of her descriptors are centred on nouns instead. An example of this is documented in Skeat's *Malay Magic* (1900):

As they approached, they hailed him by his name, but he was ashamed of their humble appearance and forbade his men from letting them on board. Though his wife advised him to acknowledge them, 'even if they were pigs or dogs,' the unfilial son persisted in turning them away. So they went back to the shore and sat down and wept; and the old mother, laying her hand upon her shrivelled breast, said, 'If thou art really my son, reared at my breast, mayest thou be changed into stone.' In response to her prayer, milk came forth from her breast, and as she walked away, the ship and all on board were turned into stone. The mother turned round once more to look at her son, but the father did not, and by the power of God, they were both turned into trees of the species pauh (a kind of mango), one leaning seawards and the other towards the land. The fruit of the seaward one is sweet, but that of the landward one is bitter.

(pp. 54-55)

Unlike Mahsuri and Puteri Gunung Ledang, the low frequency of adjectives associated with Mak Labu and Si Deruma does not focus on their physical appearance. Instead, there is a preponderance for the retellings to focus on how Mak Labu and Si Deruma feel: whether they are ‘happy’, ‘unhappy/sad’, or ‘heartbroken’. As Figure 8 shows, there is attention given to their health and socio-economic condition through adjectives such as ‘ill’, ‘old/weathered faces(s)’, and ‘poor’.



FIGURE 8. Visualised word frequency in *Bawang Putih*, *Bawang Merah* and *Si Tanggang* retellings

TABLE 7. Sentiment of adjectives describing Mak Labu and Si Deruma

Adjectives Sentiment		
Positive	Neutral	Negative
<i>kind, gentle, golden (fish), happy, magical (fish), source of comfort, true</i>	<i>beloved, biological, old/ weathered face(s), married, poor, prematurely, ready, simple, wealthiest</i>	<i>brokenhearted/heartbroken, ill, (cries) loudly, deep mistrust, (dies) prematurely/passed away, sad/sadly, shocked, sobbed/wept, unhappy</i>

Table 7 shows that there is a significant difference in the number of adjectives between descriptions of Mak Labu and Si Deruma. On the one hand, three retellings are used to describe only Mak Labu's ill health and death by using adjectives 'ill' (Menon, 2009, p. 33), 'passes/passed away' (Menon, 2009, p. 33; Rubiah, 2017, pp. 1) and '(dies) prematurely' (Wikipedia, para. 1). On the other hand, Heidi Shamsuddin (2021), who writes Text 4 of *Bawang Putih, Bawang Merah*, describes Mak Labu with adjectives that are not tied to her ill health and death. She used adjectives of 'kind' (pp. 118), 'gentle' (pp. 118) and 'beloved' (pp. 119) to refer to Mak Labu as a wife and a mother. Besides, Shamsuddin's retelling describes Mak Labu vividly when she transforms into a magical fish. As a fish, Mak Labu is described as having a 'golden' and 'magical' body in Text 4 (pp. 120). Mak Labu accumulates a total of eight adjectives in all five retellings of *Bawang Putih, Bawang Merah*, five adjectives with positive sentiment ('kind', 'gentle', 'golden (fish)', 'magical (fish)', and 'source of comfort'), three adjectives with negative sentiment ('ill', '(dies) prematurely', and 'passed away') and the remaining are neutral sentiments ('beloved'). Based on this small data, Mak Labu is portrayed positively by the writers of the retellings, as the negative sentiment adjectives are related to her illness and death, mentioned mostly in the earlier part of the texts. However, her representation as a woman and a mother is poorly mentioned in the retellings. For instance, in Text 4, Heidi described Mak Labu as a 'source of comfort,' but this character of hers benefits the main character, Bawang Merah. Therefore, her presence in the retellings only serves to highlight the characterisation of the main character.

In the case of Si Deruma, her identity seems to be intertwined closely with that of her husband, Si Talang. This is demonstrated by the frequent use of shared adjectives such as ‘*married*’, ‘*poor*’, ‘*wealthiest*’, ‘*simple*’, and ‘*weathered face(s)*’, suggesting all-neutral sentiments. These descriptors do not distinguish her as an individual and instead position her within the frame of her marital and maternal relationships. Analysis of the adjectives suggests that her character is not explored independently but is instead in relational terms. Furthermore, this use of collective adjectives diminishes her personal agency and points to the lack of representation as a woman. This highlights how dynamics are gendered in various retellings of the tale. The low frequency in the use of adjectives altogether to describe Si Deruma can be viewed along with the findings of Nurul Fateha and Ramlan (2023), whose work on the character focuses on her subjectivities and empowerment through the lens of Cohen’s Monster Theory. Paying attention particularly to the corporeal nature of Si Deruma’s curse upon Si Tanggang, Fateha and Ramlan’s (2023) study shows how Deruma’s body is mediated and the gravity of the power invested in mothers. This study, therefore, presents a complementary perspective to Fateha and Ramlan’s (2023) work on how Si Deruma is represented in various retellings of the story due to its focus on adjectives, which do not appear in Si Deruma’s infamous curse and invocation of divine punishment. This is the point where Si Deruma reclaims her agency through corporeality. Outside the curse, Nurul Fateha and Ramlan underscore that most of Si Deruma’s story is related to Si Talang and especially so to Si Tanggang. Therefore, their research as well as this current study reveal the dual nature of how Si Deruma is represented.

EMOTIONS OF MAK LABU IN *BAWANG PUTIH BAWANG MERAH* AND SI DERUMA IN *SI TANGGANG*

Unlike the emotions identified in Puteri Gunung Ledang and Mahsuri, the emotions associated with Si Deruma and Mak Labu take on a more serious nature. Since the previous sentiment data of Mak Labu and Si Deruma showcase a tendency towards negative sentiments, relatively, their emotions have a tendency to be negative as well, as presented in Figure 9:

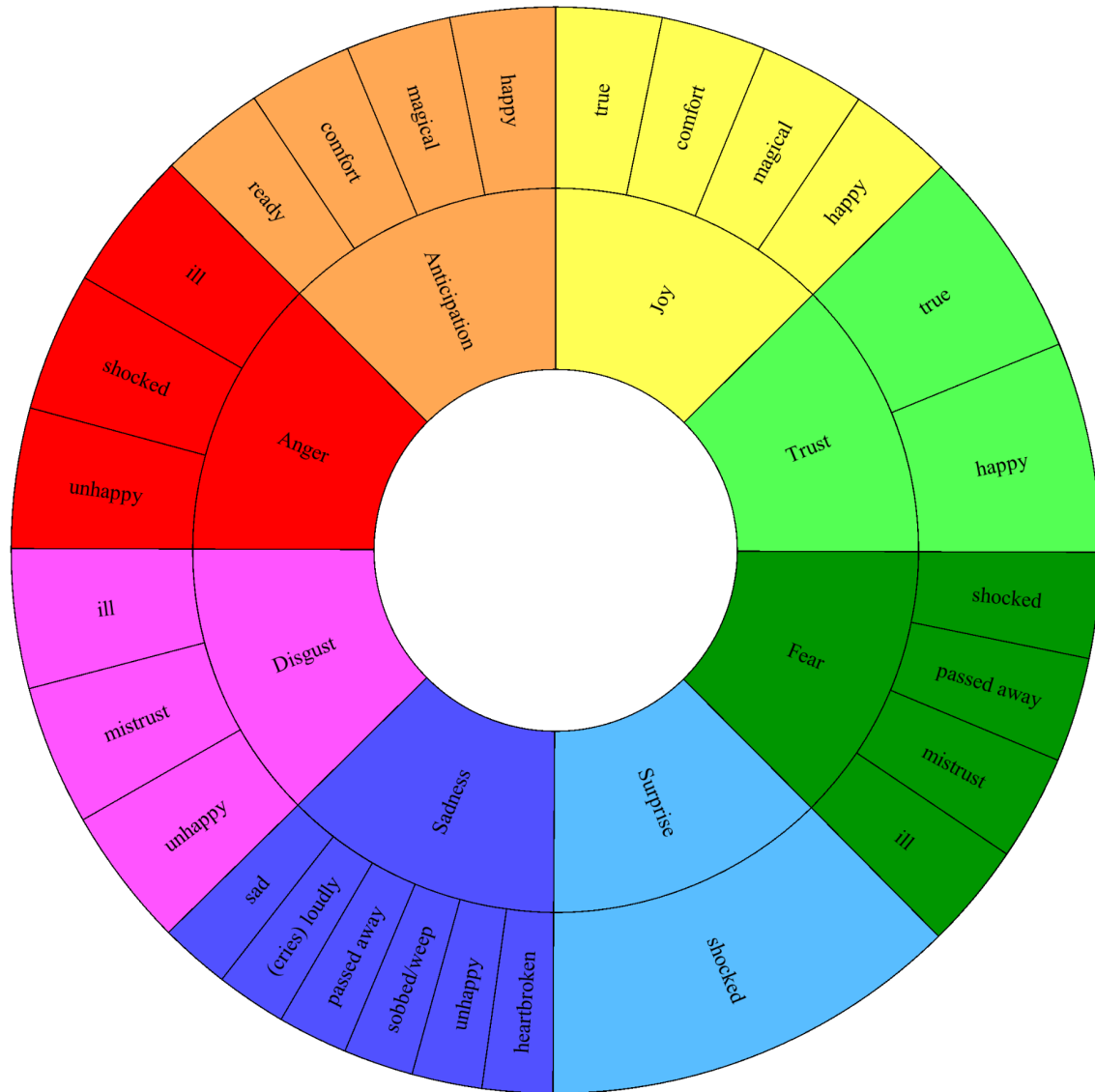


FIGURE 9. Emotion sentiments on Mak Labu's and Si Deruma's adjectives based on Plutchik's Wheel of Emotion

In *Bawang Merah*, the emotions associated with the maternal figures of Si Deruma and Mak Labu reveal significant complexities which will help us understand the affective landscape of popular Malay folktales. Si Deruma, who is often characterised as a sorrowful and burdened mother, is associated with the emotion of 'Sadness', demonstrated by the high density of adjectives that convey sorrow, as seen in Figure 8. An example of this scenario involves her 'Mistrust', which is a combination of 'Disgust' and 'Fear', particularly of the open water, demonstrating her strong maternal protectiveness of Si Tanggung, who exhibits interest in becoming a sailor. Additionally, the findings suggest a shift along Plutchik's model. Initially, Si Deruma's narrative is characterised by emotions of Joy ('happy') and Trust ('true'), perhaps elicited through what Sharon Hays describes as intensive mothering (1996) of her son. These emotions are gradually replaced by Sadness ('sad', 'heartbroken'), Disgust, and Anger ('unhappy'). This shift towards negative emotions marks a turn in the story's narrative towards tragedy, and this encapsulates her maternal

mistrust and aversion, which are often expressed through her bodily emotions. Si Deruma's mistrust and sadness are grounded in her physical presence. The prevalence of adjectives 'sad' (Gurunathan, 2004, p. 14; Ramsiyah, 2014, p. 8; Mel Lia, 2023), 'heartbroken' (Ramsiyah, 2014, p. 18) and 'unhappy' (Heidi, 2021, p. 114) suggests that her emotions are manifested physically.

Mak Labu of *Bawang Putih, Bawang Merah* is underrepresented not only in her sentiment analysis but also in emotion analysis. Similar to the data in the sentiment analysis part of her character, Mak Labu's emotion analysis functions to underscore the main character, Bawang Merah. In the retellings, Mak Labu is described as a mother who brings out negative emotions from Bawang Merah, her biological daughter. In Texts 1 (Menon, 2009) and 2 (Rubiah, 2017), with only two adjectives of 'ill' and 'passed/passes away', EmoLex interprets them as stimulating 'Fear'. This particular emotion does not belong to Mak Labu but to Bawang Merah as she is feeling 'fear' of losing her mother to illness and death. Mohammad (2011) also classifies the term 'ill', like in J. Yasodhara Menon's retelling, as 'Anger' and 'Disgust'. However, in using Mohammad's EmoLex, a further pragmatic sense needs to be considered. Data in Figure 2 classifies 'ill' as prompting 'Anger' and 'Disgust', which are not the appropriate emotions to represent Mak Labu, nor her husband, Pak Lembut and Bawang Merah. Therefore, the adjective 'ill' in Text 1 can only be considered as stimulating 'Fear'. It seems natural that, in the circumstances of Mak Labu's passing, it also stimulates 'Sadness', but as mentioned before, the emotion belongs to Bawang Merah, instead of Mak Labu herself. To add, unlike Si Deruma, the study finds that there is no shift in Mak Labu's emotions, suggesting another element of Mak Labu's underrepresentation in *Bawang Putih, Bawang Merah* retellings.

CONCLUSION

By unveiling a palimpsestic depth of positive and negative emotions, this article demonstrates that these central female figures are central to the vitality and richness of these traditional stories. Firstly, the mapping of sentiment and emotion not only exposes enduring cultural biases surrounding beauty, ageing, and motherhood but also highlights evolving agency across retellings. Secondly, this article shows the significant potential for replicating sentiment and emotion analysis in literary research; despite limitations in translation and simplified texts, this article offers a powerful means of illuminating subtle emotional undercurrents that might otherwise remain transient in conventional folktale interpretations. If folktales reflect the values a culture rehearses, revisiting their heroines through this computational lens both reframes inherited narratives and reimagines the cultural scripts we pass forward.

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