

***Manikam Kalbu* and Nusantara Women: An Inquiry into Regional Female Expertise and Knowledge**

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Abstract. What was the role of women as gatekeepers and users of technology before its modernisation and institutionalisation in Nusantara? How were they custodians of specific knowledge formed in and around the Malay world? There is no adequate amount of information in the archives for these questions to be answered sufficiently, but in *Manikam Kalbu*, Faisal Tehrani’s novel about two Malay seamsters set in a parallel period—the Malaccan sultanate in the 16th century and Malaysia in the 20th century—elicits the profound mastery of the material, tools, and art of sewing and craftsmanship by female characters who were depicted as caretakers of traditional knowledge and gatekeepers of their respective craft. Such depictions are either skewed or non-existent in Malay or Indonesian historiography, as many historical narratives are male-centric or focused on the political participation or domestic roles of women as wives and mothers. This study aims to uncover traces of historical reality from Faisal Tehrani’s fictional world as a means to fill the gap in historical literature and paint a critical and often absent picture of women in Nusantara, their expertise, their knowledge and the continuities of traditional and indigenous knowledge.

Keywords and phrases: *Manikam Kalbu*, technology, traditional knowledge, Malay, Nusantara women

Introduction: Unfilled Gaps, Uncharted Terrain

The position of women in history lies between the isolated to the assertive, touching mainly the sexual and at times, the supernatural. These stereotypes of female roles become the anchoring view of women particularly in Asia, of a certain class and stature. The general observation of historical texts shows that female was often depicted as chained to a specific set of norms and class and position often influence

their freedom of choices and roles (Hofstede and Bond 1988; Nor Hafizah and Noraida 2020). Barbara Watson Andaya illustrates that Asian women's place in the social hierarchy determines the expanse of her freedom through the availability of choice for the Indian slave girl to select a husband, as opposed to the nobles. Such affirmations of freedom were contingent and at the behest of the social structures and religious norms of the time and place (Andaya 2006; Wiesner 2022). Historical texts seldom celebrate or even mention female proactivists in changing social norms. Instead, the role of the womenfolk is often linked to the preservation of culture and systems that govern family and kinship.

In *Manikam Kalbu* (2007), Faisal Tehrani (Mohd Faizal Musa) relays some distinct, yet exciting points of an inquest into the place of women in Nusantara, specifically on how women were depicted as gatekeepers to the knowledge of textiles and fashion during the height of the Malaccan sultanate, during which discourse on women was scarce. The protagonist in *Manikam Kalbu* (henceforth *MK*) is male, but during his journey to learn about Nusantara fashion and clothing technology, he encountered various female characters, catalysed by his mother, a slave woman in the court of the Malaccan sultan. In *MK*, two themes are of interest to the history of women, particularly in the Malay world: their mastery of technology and their place as teachers. Both themes are not advanced as serious historical inquiries given the lack of primary sources on 16th-century Malay, Javanese or Sumatran women as found in *MK*. As Mahani (1998) and Cheah (1993) demonstrate, women's place was almost non-existent due to the cultural bias that underplays the extent of women's role in imparting skills and knowledge of any kind. This makes it tricky to unearth any kind of documentation on women, let alone women as intellectuals or proprietors of knowledge. To unravel the place of Nusantara women and their relationship with technology and traditional knowledge the possibilities are limited but engaging with this limitation is a crucial step forward in expanding the Malay-Nusantara historiography. This places fictional work, notably *MK* as a valuable resource to inject into the modern imagination and maybe even gives a historical understanding of how far women were involved in activities that are conventionally sacred to men.

MK's 20th-century protagonist, Ziryab is a high school student who has a special bond with his material and fabric teacher, Natasya. The characters are based in modern-day Malaysia. Ziryab's grandmother, although senile, also recalls the time she was a dressmaker to a Malay sultan and hinted at her many skills to her grandson. Meanwhile, the 16th-century parallel is focused on Manikam Kalbu, a son of a slave woman in the court of the sultan of Malacca. His journey started in Malacca, but upon winning a fashion contest held by the palace, the sultan sent him off to Aceh and Minang in Sumatra to study the fundamentals of Nusantara

dressmaking. In Aceh, Manikam Kalbu spent some time learning *aurah*, the Islamic concept of covering certain parts of the body for humility and religiosity. He then travelled to Minang, first to a small polity named Kamang. In Kamang, he became the apprentice to a mistress dressmaker, Siti Nurqomariyah. She was described as influential, wealthy, wise, in her early-30s, of exceptional beauty and possesses immense knowledge of Minang fashion or *busana* Minang. Manikam Kalbu was taught the art of making the Minang *kurung* (traditional attire in many parts of Nusantara, consisting of a long skirt or sarong, and a long tunic) dresses, including headdresses and scarf and was taught the symbolisms behind the structure and shape of dresses. Manikam Kalbu and Siti Nurqomariyah parted ways, after Manikam Kalbu's romantic advances to his teacher were denied. He then travelled to another Minang country, Pandai Sikek to learn of *songket* (a traditional fabric usually woven with gold or silver coloured thread) weaving and material dyes from an elusive old woman, Nenek Tafsinar (Faisal Tehrani 2007). The adventures and connection of people, place and artwork in the tale of Manikam Kalbu weave not only a romantic tale but assert an important case of what Siti Zainon Ismail calls *alam Melayu* or Malay world, particularly about *wilayah budaya tekstil* or the textile regional culture in which was further exemplified how a Bugis cloth, despite its origin from the island of Sulawesi, the heart of the Bugis land, but its reproduction has ramified to neighbouring provinces and kingdoms (Siti Zainon 1997, 3). Mirroring this, is the world imagined by Faisal Tehrani, in which a young man's education in the world of fabric and culture was central to the Malay Nusantara world.

Women in Southeast Asian history have been argued as "better off" than their counterparts in China, India or even Europe, but this is only attestable to narratives on politics and social life and may even argue to be contingent (Andaya 2007; Reid 1988; Lajiman 2019). In the field of sciences and technology, the role of women largely remained obscure. Reading *MK* brings in an alternate reality: women were not only depicted as knowledgeable but were also gatekeepers to knowledge, highly skilled and capable of drawing students from across the archipelago who seek to refine their proficiencies in sewing, weaving, dyeing and fabric-related crafts. *MK* is a work that came from imagination and is not based on textual evidence customarily referred to by historians. Such acknowledgements do not discredit that there is a credible curiosity here: Were there such women in Nusantara history?

To pose such an enquiry, first, the term "Nusantara" must be understood. Nusantara is a loaded geographical and cultural term. The 20th century witnessed the nationalisation of the term by Indonesian nationalists and in many ways today this is how the term is understood (Evers 2016; Ngoi 2017). Before that, Nusantara has an archipelagic scope, encompassing the islands known as the Malay world

which include the Indonesian islands, Borneo, the Philippines and the Malay peninsula (Evers 2016). The term had a different meaning from the 17th century to the 19th century – it was to denote the universality and fluidity of the Malay world (Evers 2016). Nusantara also has a cultural connotation. Under the banner of Nusantara, Sukarno had sought to unite various Dutch colonies in the East Indies not by wagering on their dissent against their colonial masters, but on their cultural affiliation and the understanding that Nusantara was an identity shared by the folks in the archipelago, despite their differences in tongue, religion and customs. Nusantara and Malay-ness are also used as interchangeable nodes of identities and not only as geographical perimeter (Evers 2016). Encompassing Nusantara as a category are a plethora of tribes and ethnicities in Indonesia, Malaysia, Patani and the Philippines, including the peninsula Malays, Dayaks from Borneo, the Javanese, Minangs – all part and parcel of the Malay world or the Malay Archipelago with cultural, linguistic and historical overlaps (Ahmat Adam 2013; Iskandar 2016; Od. M. Anwar 2016).

Another boundary that needs to be set concerns time. *MK* moves in two parallel epochs. It is simplistic to render this article to the same chronological treatment as the historiography for women's study is more complex and does not even contain comprehensive data on the lives of women during the 15th and 16th centuries. The criterion of time here is supported by the focus on traditional knowledge, with the assumption that traditional knowledge transcends and survived the afterlives of its users. The targeted disciplines or specialisations in which women are experts are on traditional knowledge, therefore the epochal limits of the study range from the 16th century to the colonial era of the 19th century. The logic behind this is traditional knowledge has hardly modified in techniques and technologies over the years and the passing of the knowledge to be practised as it was by one's ancestors is considered sacred (Sinthumule and Mashau 2020). Commonly, women are thought to be the patrons of traditional knowledge and therefore the gist of this article is not predicated solely on female-in-male-dominated-area. The unavailability of female inputs in the intellectual and technological history of Southeast Asia is evident that there is a need to take a more inclusive view on the role of women in science and technology beyond the Western definition of what is science and what counts as relevant technology (Howard 2003; International Fund for Agricultural Development 2003; Bruchac 2014).

Faisal Tehrani's protagonists may be male, but it is from the male standpoint who seek to learn from female teachers that brings the discussion into relevance. In other words, the dependency on female experts suggests that the women were able to master the technique and tools of fashion thus making them gatekeepers of knowledge. The prerogatives of women in this context are specific to the use

of traditional tools and technologies. Such narratives are formidable challenges to the common takes on women's history as sexualised beings, in which women's history is almost always of influential court women, consorts or offspring to men of power. The role of women in letters or as supporting intellectual undertakings is scarce and often secondary to their place as objects of desire or medium to wealth and domination through marriage or childbirth. Few women were an exception to such an impression, but this is the main narrative in many communities in historical Nusantara (Hijjas 2011).

An area in which women were often consulted and held in high regard was in the supernatural – as mediums, shamans, witches and intermediaries of all sorts connecting the physical world with the immaterial spiritual realms (Andaya 2006; Wiesner 2022). Female in historical narratives lies in situational relations with the natural world, the supernatural realm, men, fertility and a complex plethora of emotional and psychological elements such as love, compassion, madness and anger (Wiesner 2022). In fields that demand rigorous intellectual or technical training, such as in law or architecture or scientific experiments, the voices of women are seldom mentioned (Andaya 2007; Hirschman 2016). The reason for such scarcity is laid out clearly by Andaya, first, the history of women has been dominated by Western scholarship and Southeast Asian counterparts are far behind in expanding the narrative from male-centric approaches (Andaya 2006; 2007). This is seen to be glaring in the field of technology. Secondly, the pool of experts in this research niche is small; there are not enough historians digging into the past about women, let alone the history of women as the harbinger of learning (Andaya 2006). This limitation is acknowledged, but the fictional splendour of *MK* is utilised here as a supplementing source to uncover lesser-known histories.

Technology, Artwork and Female Prerogative

Assumptions about women's relationship with technology are expressed by Kramarae (1988, 2) as, quite simply, "Histories of technology have almost nothing to say about women". This is an acute observation, for there is indeed little written and studied about what is technology and what is the cultural place of women as inventors, users and disseminators of technology and innovation (Kramarae 1988, 2). The scope of technology, especially how it relates to women (or technology used and is familiar to women in a gendered world), especially for a time and place outside of the popularly pursued discourse, i.e., the West in modern times, lies in a grey area that can be compounded with a particular knowledge category – traditional knowledge. Traditional knowledge is a "cumulative body of knowledge vital for the maintenance of land, water and agricultural resources on which people depend" (Montanari and Bergh 2019). Technology can be defined as "complex

human cooperation” with “improved capacity”; or that technology can be attributed as man-made, the opposite of natural (Fountain 2000; Carroll 2017). Based on the reading of *MK*, it can be assumed that managing the natural world and complex interaction that lie at the heart of technology use in Nusantara is the symbiosis between traditional knowledge and (wo)man-made tools to ease everyday tasks.

Nusantara women had been associated with the use of technology for a variety of purposes, including artwork, farming and household chores. There is a stigma that certain technologies or labour were exclusive to the men, only because women were considered physically weaker to perform the task, but there is no taboo for some classes of women—slaves and farmers, mostly—to undertake them when necessary. Traditional knowledge is partial to social systems that existed before colonialism (Bruchac 2014; Mazzochi 2006). Contentiously, traditional knowledge may not even be considered a relevant discourse on technology given that it could be, as opposed to the “hard” sciences and empirical value of steam engines and microscopes, most subjects and tools of traditional knowledge lie outside or in more accommodating terms, at the margins of modern ideas of technology (Zidny, Sjöström and Eilks 2021; Chambers and Gillispie 2000; Schiebinger 2005). With such understanding, the primacy given to women as proficient mistresses of indigenous knowledge and tools may be refutable. This is not the case. Epistemological challenges to the place of local tools and traditional knowledge are not the focus of this article, but it is worthwhile to note that to consider Nusantara, its past and present, is to negotiate the caveats on technology in the same note and rhythm as done in feminist literature, that is to argue that such notions of exclusivity are contingent to the relationship between East and West throughout its history. Traditional knowledge was a legitimate and prominent technology and a valid knowledge in Nusantara and its marginalisation can only be attributed to colonial interferences.

Women’s intellect has been much discussed and this is no exception in the context of the Malay world (Hijjas 2011; Mahani 1998; Srimulyani 2012). The central argument here is how had these abilities been depicted in history vis-à-vis the imaginary world created by Faisal Tehrani. Intellectual roles of women as a poet and the general literacy of women in Nusantara, as asserted in Mulaika Hijjas’s *Victorious Wives* (2011) and likewise mentioned by Anthony Reid in “Female Roles in Pre-Colonial Southeast” (1988) demonstrates that in general, women that were in the higher status of the social hierarchy were literate, artistic and inspiring to other members of their sex. This aligns with ideals attached to the female custodians depicted in *MK*, who, apart from Manikam Kalbu’s slave mother, were teachers and artisans and mainly in some respected positions in their respective communities. This portrayal in *MK* of mistresses of the loom so to speak is a

different reality to the women in artisanal and handicraft industries in Malaysia and Indonesia. Matthew J. Schauer's analyses of women in Malaya and the Philippines during the colonial period demonstrate that traditional handicrafts were low-wage jobs and there was no prerogative to these women to make decisions on their crafts or play any role in decision-making. This may heavily be attributed to colonial interest in the crafts and the intervention that came because of their interest, thus diluting any power from local women. This reduced artistic, communal work by the locals to laborious wage-earning industries (Schauer 2017). Schauer's study is evidence of the disruptive force of colonial intervention on women's roles in handicrafts.

British anthropologist, Tom Harrisson, listed shelling, net-repairing, line-fishing and rubber-tapping as some of the common works done by women among the Malays in western Sarawak (Harrisson 1970). These village-centric and often communal tasks were essential to the survival of villagers and women were not excluded from contributing. This is true for handicraft work as well. The preservation and dissemination of indigenous artwork and crafts were seen as an important source of income and as many crafts were exclusively done by women, such as *songket* weaving, but this does not discount the significance of "everyday" tasks such as fishing for coastal communities or rubber tapping for villages in the estate. The local engagement with handicrafts and the womenfolk's appearance of powerlessness and complacency in the creative process may largely be attributed to the capitalist definition of productivity and development, as observed by Syed Hussein Alatas (2010) as uncritical of local conditions and needs. Maznah Mohamad and Matthew Schauer both provided substantiating arguments on this claim, primarily that first it must be clarified that by the 19th century, most textile production was not owned by the craftsmen but was working for a manufacturer that mediated the weavers and artisans with the market. Additionally, with the emergence of colonialists, the output and mode of production entered a global capitalist market, calling for more labour and this usually goes to the women. The consequence of the artisans, mostly women – participation in an industry they have no ownership of and were working for wages, the output was dictated by the taste and market demands that extended beyond their regional, indigenous circle (Maznah 1996; Schauer 2017).

The production and mastery of handicrafts here beg the question: has it always been an industry of lower-class labour or has it been reduced thus by colonial-capitalist ventures? What was the level of expertise of women in these areas as active users of technology (and assuming, inventors too) in the creation of their crafts? Maznah's (1996) critical study of Malay weavers yield this answer: women weavers, which were the majority sat in the mid-to-lower level of the production

line, with most labour being provided informally by housewives working at home and filling their production quota to later be handed to the enterprise that employs them. This was the situation at the turn of the century and well into the 20th century. It is unfortunate but unsurprising that no such detailed accounts are available to the context of interest in this article, but the relationship between the loom and the women that operate them can be assumed to be continuous from the pre-colonial era. Weaving and many other textile-based crafts were and still are, predominantly home-based which makes it a logical choice for a highly gendered world (Maznah 1996).

As argued earlier in this article, the scarcity of sources and mentions leaves much to be desired. If there is a historical trajectory to be extracted from the maze of pre-colonial sources, how far can it be properly established that women had such power as was presented in *MK*?

Early accounts before the mass Islamisation of the Malay peninsula, Borneo, the Indonesian islands and the Philippines, date roughly between the 14th and 16th century. Most writings about women were on the political aspects, such as the role an individual princess or queen played during their time, which is not the main argument of this article. In *MK*, women were described as artisans and teachers, active players of technology associated with the arts that mainly represent their native identities (Faisal Tehrani 2007; Siti Zainon 1997; Maznah 1996). The textual evidence in history usually highlights the dresses and accessories of the Malay or Javanese women or other local women which presented the idea that these adornments were created locally. Tome Pires, a 16th-century Portuguese explorer and writer wrote about Javanese and Sundanese women in the *Suma Oriental* as such, “The land of Java is full of mummers and masks of various kinds and both men and women do thus. They have entertainment of dance and stories; the mime, the wear mummer dresses” (Pires and Cortesão 1944, 177). Further description of women by Pires takes a less artistic route when he describes the Javanese women as independent in the following passage:

Many women of Java do not marry and remain virgins, some become Beguines after they have lost their first husband – those who do not want to burn themselves... live in chastity and die in this... like the men, ask for food for the love of God. (Pires and Cortesão 1944, 177)

Pires’s observations do not clear what the roles played by these women are, but it is implicitly suggested that Javanese women were relatively more independent-minded than their Indian peers. The mentions of dancers and dresses of the dancers

is another example of the artistic attributes assigned to women, as Stamford Raffles (2010) noted in *The History of Java*, first published in 1817 (979–980):

The dancers are decorated according to the ancient costume of the country and nearly in the same manner as a modern bride. The *tápih* or petticoat, is of silk of different colours, often green stamped with golden flowers and hanging most gracefully, a part of it falling between the feet and serving as a short train, in which in the course of the dance is frequently thrown aside by a quicker movement of the foot than ordinary. The *údat* or waistband, is of the *chindi* pattern; and on these occasions is worn the *mer* or cestus, composed of plates of gold highly ornamented with diamonds at the clasp in front. The body is enclosed in a kind of corset (*pemákak*) passing above the bosom and under the arms and confining the waist in the narrowest possible limits. The ends of the *sémbong* or sash, fall gracefully on each side on the back of the hip and reach the ground. Sometimes, indeed, this graceful appendage to the dress is brought from the back to a point between the breasts, whence being fastened in a rosette, the ends flow towards the ground in front.

Here, women were illustrated as not just artists, but through their adornments and costumes, works of art themselves. This can roughly be applied to Lajiman's (2019) claim that the focus on the female body is an overt act of "othering" or creating a deliberate separation of identities between western males and exotic, eastern females. Raffles' description indicates the immense variety and intricacies of Javanese artwork which is inherent in heritage and traditional knowledge. The active participation of Nusantara women in the creation of wearable materials is also acknowledged by Raffles in the same opus, in which he describes the duty of the women to provide clothes for their families:

It is part of the domestic economy, that the women of the family should provide the men with the clothes necessary for their apparel and from the first consort of the sovereign to the wife of the lowest peasant, the same rule is observed. In every cottage, there is a spinning wheel and loom and in all ranks, a man has accustomed to pride himself on the beauty of a cloth woven either by his wife, mistress or daughter. (Raffles 2010, 240–241)

Proactivity and expertise of the womenfolk in arts and handicraft is substantiated in the writings of Hugh Low who travelled to Sarawak during the 19th century. Low (1848) noted that it was the duty of the women to prepare baskets for the household. Meanwhile, Harrison categorises women's artistic ventures as "cottage industries" that was done on the side of more profitable works as supplementary income. Harrison (1970, 352) wrote, "Such work does best with a continuity in tradition

and continuity of supply and demand” and went on to mention that industries such as mat weaving were in decline. Many of these artworks are preserved to the modern age, despite changes in the mode of production or intention for display. Enduring traditions become evidence that artistic outputs, especially in clothing and fashion were under the purview of women (Maznah 1996).

Inferences can be made from these examples – there were instances of female prerogatives in colonial records and that female expertise was both for domestic and commercial purposes. An understanding of the “cottage industry” or female artistic ventures must be done with a flexible arch; women had and still hold multiple roles as mother, wife, homemaker and many especially outside the noble class, as economic support (Schauer 2017; Lajiman 2019; Howard 2003). Among the nobles, women were custodians of textual and oral art forms. The intersection where expertise meets the mundane is one among many factors that relegate the place of women among the pantheon of skilled and active members of society (Hijjas 2011). Another assumption here is also left unhinged: “Are women active participants in technology or just artists?” and “Are the categories interchangeable given the way women were involved in the production of handicrafts?”. To loom is also to be masterful of how the loom works. To weave is to assiduously utilise the tools. An exclusive definition may not be able to completely explain the production of arts and crafts among many communities in Nusantara given how the process was entwined with artistic and technological skills.

Associating women in fiction with women in history such as the examples given earlier limits the scope of female agency in the arts to clothing materials and wearables, items that are known not to stand the test of time and discovered as archaeological artefacts. Much of what we know comes from the continuities of traditions. *MK* rests much of its historical imaginings on activities that have continued to be done by women today.

Women as Gatekeepers

The previous section discusses the discursive nature of women’s role as artists and active users of technology. Their roles are expanded here as gatekeepers: mentors, teachers, inventors, those who were considered experts and a point of reference to others. Even more prevalent than that is if any women experts were referred to not only by their female peers but also by the male members of their communities. The objective here is not merely to validate *MK*’s presentation of the women teachers, but more importantly to bring to light the possibilities or impossibilities of subaltern narratives overlooked and overshadowed by the conventional presentation of history.

The male characters in *MK*—Ziryab and the titular character, Manikam Kalbu—made life-changing choices by dedicating their youth to the study of traditional Malay art and techniques of dressmaking. These choices brought them to learn from strong, skilled female characters all with specialities and knowledge unmatched by other characters of the book. The depiction of females as renowned teachers and respected artisans that justified travels over turbulent seas is a dramatic portrayal and perhaps a personal celebration of the author of women in Malay world history through works of fiction (Faisal Tehrani 2007). The bar between male and female is not declared to be levelled especially in dressmaking but tacitly, between Faisal Tehrani’s careful prose it is suggestive that dressmaking was a unisexual profession and that female mastery was not due to the suggestion that traditional knowledge such as dyeing cloth, selecting fabric, using the loom and other small machinery to produce the ideal Nusantara fashion was an exclusive female endeavour. This approach to storytelling, to put forth female characters as gatekeepers in a world that has no gender exclusivity, is a glittering alternative reality of women’s history in Nusantara.

As demonstrated by Mahani (2017) and Arba’iyah (2020), there is limited female representation in classical Malay texts. Hijjas (2011) substantiates this finding by positing the role of female heroics in Malay *syairs* or poems as the female that subserviently surrenders to their role as wives and mothers. The materials on women’s artistry consequently rest largely on colonial sources and this is reflected in the role of women as teachers. The imbalance of female participation may have received some attention, but a female role in technology has been marginalised mainly because, as Adas (1989, 14) argues, “It was simply assumed that women knew and cared to know little about mathematics and engineering and that the power derived from superiority in these fields should be monopolised by white males”. What we know and think we know about technology has so far been tainted with ideas of male dominance coming from a colonial worldview (Benston 2005; Kramarae 2005; Wyer 2014). How then can we search for the women expert in the traditional sphere of knowledge which narrative has been dominated by the male, white voice?

Within Nusantara’s indigenous social cosmology, male dominance in technology as a form of psychological and material hierarchy is not construed the same way as it does in the West. Western culture predicates male dominance vis-à-vis female subjugation in technology through women’s lack of mastery over sexist innovations. Instead, the role and place of women in the Malay world are best viewed from the *pantang larang*¹ associated with domesticity and gender-assigned roles. This notion is in turn tied in with ideas of respectability, seclusion and filial duties.²

Helen E. Longino observes that while women have been acknowledged to be participants of technology where “location of women in the production of the artefacts made possible by new knowledge: swift and nimble fingers on the microelectronics assembly lines”, it is seldom that they were considered as gatekeepers (in Fox and Longino 1996, 265). Juxtaposing this observation with *MK*, it is perhaps not wrong to assume that the primacy of women experts was often unmentioned by their respective colonial administrators or casual observers as the concept of respectability and taboo in a Western culture exercised caution or were even appalled by Malay or Javanese women’s intrusion into “male-centric” tasks. Even if it was mentioned, it was unlikely that it would be done in a favourable manner (Lajiman 2019).

This curiosity is apparent in Raffles’ *History of Java*, in which the production of a material is described in detail but there is only a minute indicator of the gender of the people involved in the process: “The weaver, instead of sitting in holes dug in the ground, invariably sits on a raised flooring, generally in front of the house, *her* legs being stretched out horizontally under the loom” (Raffles 2010, 540–542, emphasis added).³ Raffles went on to describe the batik and *chanting*, a technique of illustrating using melted wax that will outline the patterns on the cloth. Again, the gender of this specific task was unclear. In the same chapter, Raffles described the plight of the master smiths who switched service and loyalty from the raja of Pajajaran to Majapahit after the former polity’s downfall during the 11th century. For boat-making, experts from the districts of Rembang and Gerisik were also recognised (Raffles 2010, 549). The role of women as mentors or gatekeepers is unavailable and this stood as a stark contrast to the recognition given to male experts in other fields such as boat-making.

There were elements of magic in *MK*’s women teachers. Manikam Kalbu’s mentors were not sorceresses, but Nenek Tafsinar for example was depicted as an elusive teacher whose skills were probably guarded by mystical elements³ (Faisal Tehrani 2007). Female figures whose presence is largely unknown allowed gaps to be filled with fantastical stories, whether in fiction or non-fictional historical sources. Among the “magical” attributes associated with women, particularly from the Western point of view of Eastern women were exoticism, sensuousness, seductive and danger (Lajiman 2019). In many cultures, the idea of female power lies in the control of nature and the continuum between motherhood, the jungles and rivers and its nurturing roles which can also be challenging to tame (Wiesner 2022). Custodianship of women in this case, usually refers to the wilderness and rawness of the landscape, much like the Sabah’s Kadazan-Dusun *bobohizan* (ritual performer) who are traditionally female (Albert 2016). Harrison identifies the tentacles of female relationship to the jungle one which the jungle provides fruits,

herbs and other produce beneficial to female health, such as the nipa salt (*garam attap*) and *buah kandis* (*Garcinia xanthochymus*); women also bring into the village's products from the jungle or the beach or beachcombing, as he calls it, and gathered shells among many other items that had healing properties (Harrison 1970). The knowledge of healing and using natural products is tied strongly to the female role as guardian and element of nature. Although there were male intermediaries, such as the shaman or *pawang* in Malay culture that were also known as having a connection between two worlds, their roles were almost always associated with controlling and manipulating magic, *au contraire* to the female as part of the magic (Lajiman 2019; Andaya 2006).

Colonialism solidified the stereotype. Adjectives of sexual nature and immorality were somehow found within the discourse of magic and women in Nusantara especially during the 1800s when Victorian suppression of desires accentuated European masculinity (Lajiman 2019). It was ironic since in the same period, various components of Greco-Roman mythology were glorified especially in art and literature, such as Gaia or Mother Earth, Artemis, the Greek goddess of hunt and nature, and a collection of nymphs turned into paintings, sculptures in European homes and public spaces. What alienates Eastern female from these mythological characters in Europe was that the exotic others were often illustrated as barbaric and savage while European female was tamed spirits whose existence were on par with civilisation and its values.

Custodianship of female in Nusantara had a more complex reality – for one, it is not frequently mentioned, but there are examples in literature which demonstrates that certain female does possess mystical prowess. One which is well known among Malaysians is the story of Puteri Gunung Ledang or the Princess of Mount Ophir in the state of Johor, the southern Malaysian peninsula. The princess could be a fairy or a human with magical powers who the sultan of Malacca wishes to marry. The sultan failed to win her heart even after meeting her series of impossible demands and she was cursed to live in isolation in the mountain. Her story appeared in Tun Sri Lanang's *Sejarah Melayu* as a cautionary tale and satire against the sultan (Brown et al. 1970). She was then related to a series of mysteries of Mount Ophir till the present day but more importantly, stands as the perpetuating narrative of the complex relationships between women, nature and magic.

Gatekeeper signals a prerogative, one that can transport knowledge and experience safely and with substantial authority especially as they age (Andaya, 2006). The role of the female here remains opaque in the context of 15th to 19th-centuries Nusantara – there are still gaps which may never be addressed due to the scarcity of sources. In *MK*, fictional characters continue to tease a fantastical view of

women's dominance in certain spheres, especially as teachers and gatekeepers. The role of few women forms a flimsy basis for generalisation on the lives of thousands, yet exceptional women do account for some truth to fiction. Alas, that too remains a mystery at this point.

Conclusion

It is with much caution this claim is made that there is not much to say about female expertise in Nusantara, other than creators and guardians of arts, especially of the loom. There are potential goldmines to be explored as *hikayat* (tales) and colonial travelogues are combed through. While archaeology is another possibility, there are also journals and living women who can shed a light on historical experiences. This article has mainly been about aligning history with a work of fiction, thus opening room for an intellectual and historical discussion from an emotional journey and exposing little-known areas of history such as the place and power of women behind the loom in the pre-colonial Malay world. Manikam Kalbu as a character piques an interest in how much or how little is known about female mentors, artists and stewards of local knowledge and traditional arts as his journey across the Malay Archipelago brought several constructive encounters. These experiences groomed him to be a master in his field, a tailor to the royalties and a patron of Malay fashion. *MK* the novel is an exhilarating read – not only for its plot but also for its effort to put front and centre two men (first, boys) into learning something that was predominantly taught by the opposite sex. The idea was fantastical and its execution was a beautiful literary representation of a wonderful possibility. However, denouncing its crucial historical value, as this article demonstrates, is too naïve and premature. This is a vital discourse to be examined.

What do we know? The perimeter of traditional knowledge, the kind of knowledge associated with ideas of nativeness, pre-colonial experiences and usually practised by indigenous Nusantara women demand a fresh inspection. There is a bounty of practices and art that is under the purview of traditional knowledge that fits into studies of gender and regional history. It is also worthwhile to consider the objectivity of the classification – has it been permeated by colonial views? If so, how can we rectify the limitations of such views? Re-adjusting the clusters of traditional knowledge to move it from the obsolete and unreasonable to an alternative means of knowing, by questioning current ontological dilemmas, as had been advised by so many historians and anthropologists, such as Andaya (2006) and Alatas (1993), there is plenty we can know on the extant and degree of female participation, sustainability and the formation of post-colonial identities.

Re-aligning ontological definitions bridge the inquiry into the core of the discussion- the role of women. As demonstrated throughout the article, female roles are not necessarily limited, but the depiction of them in historical sources is. Women can be custodians, teachers, mothers or leaders and figures of authority. The limited depiction of women as users and creators of technology is even direr and this crevice of knowledge puts some implicit bars against our understanding of how traditional knowledge developed and was preserved. There are still many boxes to unpack in this regard. *MK* imagined a world in which sewing and fabrics connected various female characters through a thread of traditional knowledge that was meant to preserve a particular culture. How true was that outside the novel? And to address what was missing in this inquiry due to lack of evidence, how did women connect and guarded traditions before colonialism?

Finally, this analysis of fiction vis-à-vis history attests to the reliance on colonial sources for a nuanced understanding of life before (or during early years) of subjugation. The old Malay texts as Mahani aptly points out, left out the female. In colonial sources, female is still passive and sporadically mention under observations of family and culture, but at least, details of their lives can be unearthed from colonial writings. Raffles looked at the loom, the dresses and the dances of the Javanese. Low and Harisson admired Malay craftsmanship and brocades adorned by the women. Pires took note of the relative liberal status of women in the region. These are valuable details, no matter how sparse and biased they may be. These are observations that corroborate from a different point in time, the cultures and traditions we see in practice today.

Indeed, this inquiry is hoped to lead to other inquiries and may complement the existing understanding of women in Nusantara. Preservation of traditions through fiction is a noble effort, it puts life into an otherwise distant past that is largely underappreciated by the masses. Faisal Tehrani celebrated the unspoken lives of women using imagination, armed with the knowledge of the production of material and Nusantara fashion. The reality in history may conclude his imaginings are distorted, but this was not so. It only shows that there is still much work to be done in the gender history of the region.

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Notes

1. *Pantang larang* is roughly a set of unwritten rules or abstinence adhered to by a community (Syahrir 2016).
2. In Chakrabarty (2000), “respectability” is defined as middle-to-upper-class women keeping their presence obscured from men who are not kin.
3. Among Nenek Tafsinar’s “powers” were her elusive presence in the village, in which she can be seen or unseen. Her craft was also described as extraordinary, suggestive that paired with the very old age, a superhuman achievement.

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