

Her Voice in the Forest: A Neo-Archetypal ecoFeminist Analysis of Sang Kancil as the Female Mousedeer

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ABSTRACT

Sang Kancil, as a trickster mousedeer figure, may be seen as a cultural artefact according to Benedict Anderson's theory of Imagined Communities. Sang Kancil is traditionally seen as male in Malaysian folklore but, in more contemporary retellings, has been re-envisioned as a female trickster. These adaptations reflect socio-cultural changes which incorporate ecocritical perspectives. Therefore, this article interrogates these contemporary retellings through the lens of ecofeminism while creating new categories of neo-archetypes based on Neo-Archetypal Theory. Using contemporary revisionings of Sang Kancil: Sang Kancil & The Crocodiles by Huseinah Madihid (2016), Trick or Tree by M. Shan Mughalingam (2011), and the Millie the Mousedeer series by Robert Kanner (2014), this study looks into how the female mousedeer embodies traits of the teacher, nurturer, and magician. By shifting from the traditional Trickster archetype introduced by Jungian psychoanalysis to a more expanded scope of categories available under Neo-Archetypal Theory, this article interrogates the ways in which the female mousedeer necessitates a diversifying of the Neo-Magician archetype. The expected findings from this paper include understanding the ways in which the female Sang Kancil embodies the Neo-Magician archetype by revealing the role of the feminine in nature as a symbol of empowerment, leadership, and education. The implications of this study lead to a better understanding of the evolution of cultural artefacts over time to be more diverse and gender-inclusive.

Keywords: Sang Kancil; mousedeer; Trickster archetype; ecofeminism; Malaysian literature

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally depicted as male, *Sang Kancil* is often portrayed as a trickster who outsmarts larger and stronger adversaries using his intelligence and resourcefulness. These tales, steeped in cultural significance, have entertained generations and served as moral lessons about cunning triumphing over brute strength. However, contemporary adaptations of the Mousedeer narrative have reimagined this archetype, introducing female Mousedeer protagonists who embody a broader range of values, including ethical leadership, ecological awareness, and educational guidance. Three works that have re-imagined Sang Kancil as female have been selected for analysis in this article: *Sang Kancil & The Crocodiles* (2016) by Madihid (2016), *Trick or Tree* by Shan Mughalingam (2011), and the *Millie the Mousedeer* series by Robert Kanner (2014). All of these revisions have been selected for analysis because these works not only highlight gender fluidity in folklore but also align with the growing emphasis on ecological awareness and the empowerment of women. Because of the connection between the female Mousedeer and ecological imperatives, this article, therefore, deploys an ecofeminist approach combined with our modification of the

Neo-Archetypal theory by creating new categories of Neo-Archetypes specifically meant for the analysis of the Mousedeer figure. This evolution of Sang Kancil as an ecologically conscious feminine archetype also heralds the evolution of Sang Kancil as a cultural artefact, according to Benedict Anderson's (1983) theorising of the ways in which cultural artefacts bind imagined communities in Nationhood. In *Imagined Communities* (1983), Anderson writes that cultural artefacts once created are 'modular', by which he infers that they are "capable of being transplanted" to thereby "merge and be merged with a correspondingly wide variety of political and ideological constellations" (p.4). Cultural artefacts, therefore, are transferrable and ripe for transformation, as can be seen in the transformation of Sang Kancil in contemporary narratives.

The shift from male to female Mousedeer protagonists marks a significant evolution in Malaysian folklore. This transformation reflects changing societal values and provides a platform for exploring themes of gender equality, empowerment, and collaboration. Traditionally associated with male trickery, the Mousedeer has become a vessel for reimagining female leadership and representation in folklore. By adopting the female pronoun and traits associated with nurturing and teaching, the modern Mousedeer figure redefines the archetype to align with contemporary cultural priorities. Therefore, this study focuses on three key works that exemplify this transformation and which specifically contain those ecofeminist elements which lend themselves towards the creation of new categories of neo-archetypes in this article: *Sang Kancil & The Crocodiles* by Madihid (2016), *Trick or Tree* by M. Shan Mughalingam (2011), and the *Millie the Mousedeer* series by Kanner (2014). Each of these works reinterprets the Mousedeer figure in ways that resonate with modern audiences. Madihid's retelling presents Miss Kancil as a moral and empathetic problem-solver who values harmony and trust. Shan Mughalingam's *Trick or Tree* introduces Kamariah, a bold ecofeminist Mousedeer who leads a community effort against environmental destruction. Kanner's *Millie the Mousedeer* series showcases Millie as a nurturing educator who uses her cleverness to promote cultural awareness and teamwork. The reimagined Mousedeer character is particularly significant in the context of Malaysian culture, where folklore serves as a mirror of societal values and collective identity. Traditionally, *Sang Kancil* represented the clever underdog triumphing over the powerful, resonating with communities that valued intelligence and cunning as tools of survival. The modern adaptations expand on this foundation, addressing issues such as ecological sustainability, gender roles, and the importance of education. These stories challenge traditional archetypes by presenting the Mousedeer not just as a trickster but as a leader, teacher, and advocate for change.

There is a strong connection between the repositioning of Sang Kancil as a female mousedeer and ecocritical imperatives. Therefore, an ecofeminist approach will be combined with a neoarchetypal analysis in this article. The Mousedeer as a female protagonist also underscores a broader cultural shift toward inclusivity and gender equality. In traditional tales, women were often relegated to supporting roles or depicted as passive figures. The emergence of the female Mousedeer challenges this norm, offering young readers role models who are clever, independent, and capable of leading social and environmental change. This shift in the perception of this cultural artefact fittingly reflects the growing recognition of women's contributions to education, leadership, and community-building in modern Malaysian society. Zein & Setiawan (2017) write that "ecofeminism is a branch of feminism that sees environmentalism, and the relationship between women and the earth, as foundational to its analysis and practice." The main objectives of this article are therefore, to first analyse how contemporary adaptations reinterpret the Mousedeer figure from an ecofeminist perspective that connects the feminine characteristics of the re-envisioned Sang Kancil to ecological responsibility. Next is to examine the cultural and literary

significance of portraying the Mousedeer as a female protagonist. Finally, this article highlights the archetypal evolution of the Mousedeer from a traditional male trickster to a female Magician archetype embodying wisdom, transformation, and empowerment through the lens of neo-archetypal theory. By exploring these themes, this study contributes to understanding how folklore evolves to meet the needs of its audience and serves as a vehicle for promoting progressive social narratives by evolving existing cultural artefacts. The Mousedeer's transformation from a mischievous male trickster to a wise and nurturing female leader reflects not only the adaptability of folklore but also the shifting priorities of Malaysian society. This reimagining offers a fresh perspective on a beloved cultural icon, demonstrating how tradition can intersect with innovation to inspire new generations.

Modern interpretations of the mousedeer shift from the male Trickster archetype to a female Magician archetype, representing wisdom, education, and ecological advocacy. The first interpretation is that of the Female Mousedeer as an Educator, which is a Nurturer and Mother Figure. Female mousedeer figures, such as Kamariah in *Trick or Tree* and Miss Kancil in *Sang Kancil & The Crocodiles*, embody values of caregiving and guidance. Their roles extend beyond cleverness, emphasising nurturing traits traditionally associated with women. The next one is the Female Mousedeer Figure, which breaks the Gender Stereotype. These modern depictions of the female Mousedeer challenge stereotypes by showing that intelligence and cunning are not confined to one gender. Here, female mousedeer figures are presented as capable educators and problem-solvers, breaking traditional archetypes. Finally, the female Mousedeer figures are also used to point towards Representation and Empowerment. For example, female mousedeer figures like Kamariah and Millie represent empowered individuals who lead with wisdom and wit. Their stories provide relatable and aspirational role models for female readers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

KEY THEMES IN MODERN MOUSEDEER TALES

The modern iterations of the Mousedeer figure share several overarching themes, which highlight the archetype's versatility and relevance. The reimagined Mousedeer challenges traditional gender norms by placing female characters in roles traditionally dominated by males. This shift not only provides representation for young girls but also redefines the Mousedeer as a symbol of empowerment and leadership. For instance, in *Sang Kancil & The Crocodiles* by Huseinah Madihid, *Trick or Tree* by M. Shan Mughalingam, and *Festival of Kites* by Robert Kanner, the Mousedeer is reinterpreted as a Teacher Magician archetype. These characters go beyond the traditional trickster role, embodying modern virtues such as inclusivity, resilience, and ecological responsibility. The Mousedeer's transformation from a solitary trickster to a collaborative educator mirrors broader cultural shifts toward empowerment and social harmony.

The Mousedeer's evolution aligns with the archetype of the teacher, emphasising the value of education and guidance. Millie in *Festival of Kites* exemplifies this by mentoring her friends and fostering teamwork, showcasing the Mousedeer as a collaborative leader who uplifts those around her. Modern Mousedeer tales often integrate themes of ecological preservation, reflecting contemporary concerns about environmental sustainability. Kamariah's ecofeminist crusade in *Trick or Tree* highlights the intersection of gender and environmental issues, demonstrating the Mousedeer's potential to address pressing global challenges. These stories continue to serve as vehicles for imparting moral values and cultural knowledge. From Millie's lessons on

collaboration and perseverance to Miss Kancil's emphasis on honesty and fairness, the Mousedeer remains a powerful tool for education and social commentary. The Mousedeer's enduring appeal lies in its adaptability. While the traditional *Sang Kancil* tales resonated with audiences by showcasing the power of wit and intelligence, modern reinterpretations have expanded the archetype's scope, making it more inclusive and multidimensional. This shift reflects Malaysia's evolving cultural landscape, where traditional values coexist with contemporary ideals. The Mousedeer's role as a symbol of cleverness remains intact, but its application has broadened to include themes of empowerment, education, and environmental stewardship. This transformation underscores the Mousedeer's relevance as a cultural artefact, capable of bridging the past and present while offering valuable insights into the future.

In recent years, the Mousedeer's archetype has undergone significant transformation. Contemporary adaptations have shifted the Mousedeer from the Trickster archetype to roles that embody more collaborative and nurturing traits. This evolution aligns with changing societal values that emphasise education, ecological awareness, and gender equality. The transition from a male to a female Mousedeer protagonist is a notable development in this evolution. In traditional tales, *Sang Kancil* is often portrayed as mischievous and self-serving, concerned primarily with its survival. In modern retellings, the Mousedeer takes on the role of a teacher, leader, and advocate for social and environmental change. This shift is not merely a matter of gender but reflects a broader reimagining of the Mousedeer as a figure of wisdom, compassion, and ethical responsibility.

Modern adaptations of the Mousedeer narrative have introduced female protagonists who reflect contemporary values and priorities. For example, Huseinah Madihid's *Sang Kancil & The Crocodiles* (2016) reimagines the Mousedeer as Miss Kancil, a moral and empathetic character who values trust and harmony. Unlike the traditional *Sang Kancil*, who humiliates the crocodiles after tricking them, Miss Kancil expresses remorse for her actions and seeks to build a relationship based on mutual respect. Similarly, M. Shan Mughalingam's *Trick or Tree* (2011) introduces Kamariah, a female Mousedeer who fights against illegal logging and deforestation. Kamariah is portrayed as a bold and progressive ecofeminist leader who challenges traditional gender roles and advocates for environmental conservation. Her character represents a new archetype that blends the cunning of the Trickster with the wisdom and foresight of the Magician.

The *Millie the Mousedeer* series by Robert Kanner (2014) further exemplifies this evolution. Millie is portrayed as a nurturing and collaborative educator who uses her cleverness to teach lessons about teamwork, cultural awareness, and problem-solving. Unlike the traditional *Sang Kancil*, who often acts alone, Millie's stories emphasise the importance of community and collaboration. The Mousedeer's transformation from a male Trickster to a female Magician reflects broader changes in Malaysian society. As a cultural artefact, the Mousedeer serves as a mirror of societal values and priorities. By reimagining *Sang Kancil* as a female character, modern adaptations challenge traditional gender roles and offer new perspectives on leadership, collaboration, and ecological responsibility. This transformation enriches the cultural narrative, providing young readers with role models who embody both intelligence and compassion.

As such, the Mousedeer's journey from a traditional Trickster to a modern Magician reflects the dynamic interplay between folklore and societal values. As Malaysian society continues to evolve, the Mousedeer remains a vital and relevant figure, inspiring new generations to embrace values of wisdom, resilience, and collaboration. The following chapters will explore these modern adaptations in greater detail, examining how they reinterpret the Mousedeer archetype to align with contemporary cultural contexts.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

CULTURAL ARTEFACTS

Cultural artefacts give us insights and knowledge in relation to the culture and history of its creators or users. Görgen et al. (2019) explains that "within society, cultural artefacts play a central role in the distribution of knowledge". By cultural artefacts we usually think of anything that has been made with intent of an author or a maker that in some way is characterised by having a purpose. Though it has to be human made, it does not necessary mean it has to be a physical object. These non-physical artefacts are classed under social artefacts, which, unlike the artefacts that are found in an archaeological dig, do not have any physical form. They are instead ideas, stories, and other abstract creations from a certain people group. "Within society, cultural artefacts play a central role in the distribution of knowledge" (Görgen et al., 2019). Therefore, cultural artefacts serve as a form of stored knowledge that can be used to study the culture of a certain society or civilisation.

Cultural artefacts not only store information about a culture but are also used to form the identity of a certain society or even nation. Enric Castelló (2016) explains that it is this kind of cultural artefact which allows Anderson (1983) to conceptualise the idea of nation. Anderson defines "nationalism and nationality as a "cultural artefact" and the idea of a nation as an "imagined political community" (Castelló, 2016). In other words, cultural artefacts are an "image of communion" which is a factor that unites a group of people in a nation, as they all share a similar national folktale which leads to a sense of belonging and recognition. This is because Anderson's concept of a nation revolves around the concept that print culture is one of the major reasons why a shared imagination of a nation is shaped and whereby cultural artefacts are created.

ARCHETYPES AND NEO-ARCHETYPES

Archetypal patterns in both traditional and modern Mousedeer figures are identified and interrogated in this article. Traditional characters have been aligned with Jungian archetypes, while modern characters are analysed through the lens of Neo-Archetypes. The analysis in this article is conducted by adapting and further expanding Faber & Mayer (2009)'s Neo-archetypal theory to examine the way the Mousedeer's role has evolved from being a Trickster to a Neo-archetypal Magician. This analysis highlighted the evolution of archetypes, including the transition of Sang Kancil from a traditional trickster figure to a modern eco-heroine. In its traditional form, *Sang Kancil* embodies the Trickster archetype. This archetype is characterised by its cunning, adaptability, and ability to manipulate situations to its advantage. Tricksters often operate outside societal norms, challenging authority and disrupting the status quo. In the case of *Sang Kancil*, this disruption is usually portrayed in a positive light, as the Mousedeer uses its wit to outsmart more powerful but morally flawed opponents. For example, in the traditional tale *Sang Kancil and the Tiger*, the Mousedeer tricks the tiger into believing a shadowy object is the king's gong, thereby escaping from a dangerous situation. This aligns with Donald Haase's (2008) observation that Trickster figures often create elaborate deceptions to achieve their goals, relying on wit rather than strength. The Mousedeer's traditional role as a Trickster resonates with Malaysian audiences, particularly in the context of cultural values that celebrate intelligence and resourcefulness. The tales reflect a deep respect for the underdog and the belief that cleverness can triumph over brute force. However, as society evolves, so too does the archetype, adapting to new cultural contexts and expectations.

Specifically, this article explores the ways in which the transformation of Sang Kancil from male to female figure heralds Kancil's transformation from the trickster archetype to the magician neo-archetype. Following this hypothesis, a further re-categorising of the female Kancil ensued, creating the sub-categories of ecofeminist magician and educational magician. These sub-categories highlight the ways in which Kancil, as a female mousedeer becomes a voice for the environment and for the educating of future generations of Malaysians so as to be more environmentally responsible.

ECOFEMINISM

Ecofeminism is a theory which combines both ecological and feminist concerns, as a result of living in a male dominant society. One of the primary roots of ecofeminism is naturally ecocriticism, which Arunya and Kumar (2024) aver are connected to philosophical ideas that "define the relationship between human beings and nature" (p. 92). Subsequently, ecofeminism "arose from movements that critique modernity using historical and sociopolitical theory" (Besthorn & McMillen, 2002). Zein and Setiawan (2017) explain that "ecofeminist thinkers draw on the concept of gender to analyse the relationships between humans and the natural world". Ecofeminism ultimately came into being mainly through deconstruction of grand narratives of oppression seen as rooted in market economies with the combination of natural ecological theory: "a feminist/ecological dominance theory rooted in the destructive ethos of patriarchy" (Besthorn & McMillen, 2002). Recent literature highlights the fit between ecofeminism and indigenous ways of knowing and makes headway in acknowledging the fundamental role of indigenous peoples as caretakers who enfold ecofeminist and indigenous "principles that inform climate action and Green New Deal proposals" therefore highlighting "the transformative potential of dismantling existing...exploitation of human and natural resources" (Bhuyan et al., 2019, p.292). These perspectives on ecofeminism inform this article's analysis of the revised feminine Sang Kancil as an ecofeminist figure.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research investigates the ways in which archetypal representations shift between traditional and modern narratives, the absorption of Sang Kancil folklore into contemporary storytelling. Following from this primary aim, this study modifies existing neo-archetypes through an ecofeminist lens to explore the transformation of the Sang Kancil folklore in contemporary depictions of Mousedeer figures.

In order to derive these modified neo-archetypes, a corpus of traditional and modern Mousedeer tales was compiled, and sourced from folklore archives, printed books, and online platforms. Textual analysis was conducted to examine the integration of Sang Kancil folklore into new narratives, focusing on characterisation, thematic evolution, and storytelling techniques. The historical dissemination of these tales through print culture was also assessed to understand its role in shaping and popularising the Mousedeer figure.

Traditional and modern Mousedeer tales were then comparatively analysed to highlight the adaptations and continuities in character development, plot structures, and narrative themes. This method uncovered the ways modern writers incorporate elements of Sang Kancil folklore to resonate with contemporary audiences and the ways in which these modified neo-archetypes fit within the continuum of Sang Kancil as a cultural artefact.

DISCUSSION

THE FEMALE MOUSEDEER AS THE MAGICIAN TEACHER

Huseinah Madihid's *Sang Kancil & The Crocodiles* (2016) introduces a modern retelling of the classic Mousedeer folktale with a key transformation: the traditionally male Mousedeer, *Sang Kancil*, is reimagined as Miss Kancil, a female protagonist. This adaptation does not simply gender-swap the character but reshapes the narrative to emphasise empathy, mutual respect, and moral responsibility. In so doing, Madihid adds a fresh perspective to a well-loved tale, making it relevant for contemporary readers while maintaining the Mousedeer's hallmark traits of intelligence and cunning. The plot of *Sang Kancil and The Crocodiles* follows the familiar structure of the Mousedeer needing to cross a crocodile-infested river to obtain food (Madihid, 2016, p.18). Miss Kancil devises a clever plan to outwit the crocodiles by pretending to count them on behalf of King Sulaiman. She convinces the crocodiles to line up across the river, creating a bridge for her to cross safely. However, unlike traditional versions of the tale where *Sang Kancil* mocks and humiliates the crocodiles after the deception, Miss Kancil acknowledges her trickery and makes a heartfelt promise to repay their help.

For example, after crossing the river, Miss Kancil addresses the crocodiles:

"Thank you, dear crocodiles, for you have helped me. A chance to eat me you have missed, but I will ask King Sulaiman to give you a feast."

(Madihid, 2016, p. 18)

This moment marks a significant departure from the traditional narrative, where *Sang Kancil* revels in his cunning, leaving the crocodiles angry and vengeful. Miss Kancil's promise reframes the Mousedeer as a character of integrity and gratitude, offering readers a new moral dimension (Madihid, 2016, p. 18). The Mousedeer's intelligence is immediately evident as she devises a plan to persuade the crocodiles to line up across the river by pretending to be on an important mission for King Sulaiman. The tale starts with Miss Kancil addressing her hunger, a common motif in traditional Trickster tales. Donald Haase (2008) highlights that hunger often acts as the catalyst for action in Trickster narratives, and this remains true in the case of Miss Kancil tricking the crocodiles:

"But no beet, no wheat, not a single sweet treat was there for the little mousedeer to eat. So, the mousedeer stood thinking for a while, 'I should go across the river,' she said with a smile."

(Madihid, 2016, pp. 3-4)

The story sets up the crocodiles as both an obstacle and a test of Miss Kancil's cunning. Her initial approach mirrors that of traditional *Sang Kancil* tales, where the Mousedeer manipulates the crocodiles into becoming stepping stones. She uses the promise of a feast at King Sulaiman's palace to bait them:

"I have with me the great King Sulaiman's invitation, but you can only have it on one condition."
(Madihid, 2016, p. 10)

This narrative mirrors the traditional *Sang Kancil* story, where the Mousedeer uses deception to achieve its goals. However, while the traditional tales focus on the Mousedeer's selfish triumph, Miss Kancil's journey is characterised by a deeper moral undertone.

Deception remains central to the Mousedeer's strategy, but Madihid adds layers of complexity to Miss Kancil's actions. Unlike her male counterpart, who often escapes with no regard for the consequences, Miss Kancil acknowledges the impact of her actions and makes a heartfelt effort to mend relations with the crocodiles. For instance, after successfully crossing the river, she confesses her trickery:

"Oh, dear Crocs, crocs, crocs! I jumped on you like rocks. There is no feast or party, and now you all are hungry."

(Madihid, 2016, p. 17)

This confession, which could have provoked anger, instead becomes a turning point in the narrative. Miss Kancil's sincerity and promise to fulfil her obligations win over the crocodiles, who respond with trust and newfound respect:

"Sang Kancil, you have a deal. Today we learnt that helping is a must, so in you, we are placing our trust."
(Madihid, 2016, p. 20)

This shift in tone represents a significant departure from traditional Trickster tales, where the antagonist is often humiliated and vengeful. Here, the crocodiles evolve into allies, and the Mousedeer emerges not only as a clever strategist but also as a responsible leader.

Symbolically, the river represents a transitional space: a barrier between the Mousedeer and her goal. Crossing the river requires Miss Kancil to confront her fears, navigate danger, and demonstrate her resourcefulness. The crocodiles, as guardians of this liminal space, embody the chaotic forces she must outwit. According to Guerin (2005), rivers in folklore often signify transition and rebirth. "The river represents death and rebirth (baptism), transition in life." (Guerin, 2005, p. 161). By crossing the river and transforming the adversarial relationship into one of mutual respect, Miss Kancil achieves a metaphorical rebirth, evolving from a simple Trickster figure into a Magician archetype—a wise mediator capable of fostering harmony.

In traditional *Sang Kancil* tales, such as *Hikayat Sang Kancil* (Zahari, 2015), the Mousedeer's interactions with the crocodiles are marked by deceit and ridicule. For instance, in Zahari's version, *Sang Kancil* mocks the crocodiles after crossing the river, leaving them humiliated and vowing revenge:

"The crocodiles, feeling deceived and insulted, vowed that they would not be tricked again. They were left behind, seething with anger."

(Zahari, 2015, p. 15)

In contrast, Miss Kancil's approach in Madihid's retelling emphasises reconciliation. She does not ridicule the crocodiles but instead appeals to their trust and generosity. This subtle but profound change reflects contemporary values of empathy and mutual respect.

Miss Kancil emerges as a leader who exemplifies the qualities of a Magician archetype—wisdom, foresight, and the ability to resolve conflicts peacefully. Her leadership is not based on brute strength or coercion but on her ability to inspire trust and create connections. This diplomatic

approach is evident in her dialogue with the crocodiles, where she addresses them respectfully as “dear crocodiles” (Madihid, 2016, p. 15) and acknowledges their role in her success. By doing so, she fosters a sense of mutual respect, paving the way for a harmonious resolution.

Madihid redefines the Mousedeer’s quest as more than a test of cunning—it becomes a journey of moral growth and transformation. By blending traditional elements with modern values, Madihid creates a tale that resonates with contemporary audiences, emphasising the importance of empathy, accountability, and the responsible use of intelligence. Miss Kancil’s actions remind us that true leadership lies not in outsmarting others but in building bridges of understanding and trust.

FROM TRICKSTER TO MAGICIAN

Miss Kancil’s actions align her with the Magician archetype, representing wisdom, insight, and the ability to transform adversarial relationships into cooperative ones. While the traditional *Sang Kancil* is a Trickster who thrives on outwitting his opponents for personal gain, Miss Kancil uses her cunning for the greater good. She seeks to build bridges—both metaphorically and literally—between herself and the crocodiles. The crocodiles’ response to Miss Kancil’s promise demonstrates this shift:

“Sang Kancil, you have a deal. Today we learnt that helping is a must, so in you, we are placing our trust.”

(Madihid, 2016, p. 20)

Here, the crocodiles are no longer embittered victims of a clever prank but willing participants in a lesson of mutual cooperation and trust. This archetypal evolution is further emphasised by Miss Kancil’s empathetic approach. By treating the crocodiles as more than mere obstacles, she transforms them from antagonists into allies, creating a resolution rooted in harmony rather than conflict.

Huseinah Madihid’s *Sang Kancil & The Crocodiles* breathes new life into the Mousedeer folktale, transforming it into a narrative of empathy, moral responsibility, and leadership. By reimagining *Sang Kancil* as Miss Kancil, Madihid not only challenges traditional gender norms but also offers a powerful lesson in the importance of trust and cooperation. This adaptation serves as a testament to the enduring relevance of folklore and its ability to evolve with the times, resonating with audiences both young and old.

THE FEMALE MOUSEDEER AS ECOFEMINIST MAGICIAN

M. Shan Mughalingam’s *Trick or Tree*, featured in *Malaysian Tales: Retold and Remixed* (2011), reimagines the Mousedeer figure as Kamariah Kancil, a female protagonist balancing traditional wisdom with modern activism. While deeply rooted in the folklore of *Sang Kancil*, *Trick or Tree* diverges by embedding ecological and feminist themes into its narrative. Kamariah, a descendant of the legendary *Sang Kancil*, embodies the role of an *Ecofeminist Magician*, leading a mission to protect the jungle from illegal loggers while challenging patriarchal norms.

Kamariah’s journey in *Trick or Tree* begins with her determination to return to the jungle, a place that holds cultural and ecological significance as her ancestral home. However, this decision is met with resistance from her mother, Mak Kancil, who represents traditional patriarchal values and holds a conservative view of gender roles and safety. This generational and ideological

conflict serves as a microcosm of the larger societal struggles between tradition and progress, as well as between ecological preservation and exploitation.

Mak Kancil's concerns are clearly expressed in her dialogue:

"It's dangerous for anyone, especially for a tiny thing like you," Mak says as she taps her hooves on her hind legs four times within one second.

(Shan Mughalingam, 2011, p. 186)

This statement not only reflects the prevailing stereotype of women as fragile and incapable of handling dangerous tasks but also underscores the internalised patriarchy that Kamariah must confront. Mak Kancil's dismissive attitude mirrors societal tendencies to underestimate women's resilience and agency, particularly in matters traditionally deemed male-dominated, such as activism and leadership.

Kamariah, however, rejects this narrative, asserting her independence and her commitment to ecological activism. Her response to her mother's concerns is firm and visionary:

"Mak, I can see you're upset, but there are many illegal timber loggers. If we NGO members don't move in quietly, we will never catch them."

(Shan Mughalingam, 2011, p. 186)

Kamariah's role as an NGO worker highlights her active engagement in contemporary environmental struggles, linking her to the ecofeminist ideology that advocates for the interconnected liberation of women and nature. Ecofeminism, as defined by Zein and Setiawan (2017), "draws on the concept of gender to analyse the relationships between humans and the natural world" and challenges the domination of both women and the environment by patriarchal systems. Kamariah embodies the *Ecofeminist Magician* archetype, utilising her wit, courage, and empathy to bridge divides and inspire action. Her mission to protect the jungle is not solely a personal quest but a communal effort to preserve the ecological balance and challenge systemic exploitation. This is particularly evident in her conversation with her mother, where she reframes the issue of illegal logging as a collective responsibility:

"Mak, the illegal loggers have found ways to make some of them close one eye."
"How do they do that?"
"Money optics, Mak."

(Shan Mughalingam, 2011, p.186)

Here, Kamariah identifies corruption as a critical barrier to environmental protection, illustrating her understanding of the broader socio-political dynamics at play. Her use of the term "money optics" cleverly critiques the way monetary incentives are used to distort accountability, a common theme in ecofeminist discourses that critique capitalist and patriarchal structures (Shan Mughalingam, 2011, p.186).

In traditional Mousedeer tales, the protagonist often relies on cunning for self-preservation, operating as a trickster figure. Kamariah, however, transcends this archetype, channelling her cleverness toward collective empowerment and ecological activism. This evolution is symbolised in her confrontation with her mother's traditional beliefs, where she challenges not only her own limitations but also those imposed by her family and society. Her relationship with her crocodile partner, Bakar, further exemplifies this transformation. Bakar's support of Kamariah as a leader subverts the predator-prey dynamic traditionally associated with Mousedeer and crocodiles. Their partnership symbolises unity across species and genders, a central tenet of ecofeminism:

“Kam, I’ll follow your lead. This isn’t about pride—it’s about doing what’s right.”
(Shan Mughalingam, 2011, p.192)

This statement underscores the egalitarian nature of their collaboration, positioning Kamariah as a leader whose vision and determination transcend traditional boundaries (Shan Mughalingam, 2011, p.192). Kamariah’s willingness to risk her safety by returning to the jungle and engaging with the crocodiles demonstrates her commitment to her cause. She acknowledges the danger but remains resolute:

“Mak, we are trying to build bridges between us and all environmentalists to fight our real enemy.”
(Shan Mughalingam, 2011, p. 189)

This statement encapsulates her role as a unifying figure, bridging divides not only between humans and animals but also between conflicting ideologies. Her leadership challenges traditional power structures, emphasising collaboration over domination.

Kamariah’s quest serves as a narrative vehicle for exploring ecofeminist principles. Her journey highlights the interconnectedness of gender and environmental justice, demonstrating how traditional hierarchies can be dismantled through empathy, collaboration, and resilience. Her ability to challenge her mother’s patriarchal mindset and unite disparate groups against a common threat positions her as a transformative figure in both folklore and contemporary activism. The story’s central theme—challenging exploitation and fostering unity—aligns with ecofeminist ideals that advocate for the liberation of both women and nature. Kamariah’s actions and leadership exemplify these values, making her a compelling and progressive reinterpretation of the Mousedeer archetype. In a nod to the classic *Sang Kancil* tale, Kamariah must cross a crocodile-infested river to reach the jungle. However, unlike her ancestor, Kamariah’s objective is not driven by self-preservation or trickery but by a desire to unite the crocodiles and other jungle inhabitants against the illegal loggers (Shan Mughalingam, 2011, p.194). This recontextualisation of the river-crossing motif infuses the story with ecological significance. Kamariah enlists the help of her crocodile partner, Bakar, who challenges the stereotypical enmity between Mousedeer and crocodiles:

“My buaya brethren won’t be easy to convince, Kam. They see you as prey, not a partner.”
“We need to break that cycle, Bakar. This fight isn’t just about us—it’s about saving our home.”
(Shan Mughalingam, 2011, p. 194)

Kamariah’s strategy involves appealing to the crocodiles’ sense of community and shared responsibility for the jungle’s survival. Her willingness to risk her safety to gain their trust underscores her role as an *Ecofeminist Magician*, capable of bridging divides and inspiring collective action. Kamariah’s relationship with Bakar, a crocodile, further subverts traditional narratives (Shan Mughalingam, 2011, p.192). Their partnership challenges not only species-based animosity but also gender dynamics, as Bakar willingly supports Kamariah’s leadership. His dialogue reflects his progressive mindset:

“Kam, I’ll follow your lead. This isn’t about pride—it’s about doing what’s right.”
(Shan Mughalingam, 2011, p. 192)

Bakar's acceptance of Kamariah's authority signifies a break from patriarchal norms, positioning their relationship as a model of egalitarian collaboration. Together, they represent the potential for unity across differences, whether species-based or gender-based. Kamariah's crossing of the river, aided by the crocodiles, serves as both a literal and symbolic act. It represents her acceptance as a leader by the jungle's inhabitants and her transition from an individual activist to a unifying figure. The crocodiles, once seen as adversaries, become her allies, reflecting the transformative power of empathy and collaboration.

In *Trick or Tree*, Shan Mughalingam transforms the Mousedeer archetype into a powerful symbol of environmental and social justice. Kamariah's journey reflects the evolution of traditional folklore to address contemporary issues, emphasising the importance of unity, empathy, and the responsible use of power. Her story serves as a compelling reminder of the potential for individuals and communities to create meaningful change, even in the face of systemic challenges.

THE FEMALE MOUSEDEER AS THE EDUCATIONAL MAGICIAN

Millie the Mousedeer, created by Robert Kanner and brought to life in collaboration with Inspidea Studios, represents a modern reinterpretation of the Mousedeer archetype. Unlike the trickster or ecofeminist interpretations of the Mousedeer figure, Millie is designed as a symbol of education, teamwork, and cultural representation. Her stories are tailored for a younger audience, emphasising moral values, problem-solving, and Malaysian culture.

Millie is a significant departure from traditional Mousedeer tales. Rather than focusing on outsmarting predators or navigating ecological challenges, Millie's tales emphasise cooperation, cultural pride, and ethical problem-solving. She is a clear example of the archetypal *Teacher Magician*, using her cleverness to inspire and educate those around her. In *Festival of Kites* (2014), Millie embodies the role of a mentor, guiding her friends through the challenges of a kite competition. Unlike the solitary cunning of Sang Kancil, Millie's intelligence is directed toward helping her community thrive. The story begins with Millie crafting an elaborate plan to create a dragon kite using the contributions of her friends, each of whom has their own unique kite design.

"This year, Millie had an exciting kite idea. If she were clever enough, her friends would be the stars of the festival."

(Kanner, 2014, p. 3)

This quote underscores Millie's selflessness and her commitment to teamwork. Her clever plan is not about personal glory but about elevating her friends and fostering a sense of unity. Millie's approach to leadership is rooted in collaboration and empowerment. She ensures that her friends are involved in every step of the process, teaching them valuable lessons about patience, practice, and perseverance. For example, when her friends struggle to assemble and fly their kites, Millie offers guidance with kindness and encouragement:

"Just hold up your kite and wait for the wind."

(Kanner, 2014, p. 16)

This simple advice reflects Millie's role as a patient mentor who fosters confidence in others. Her ability to teach practical lessons while maintaining a nurturing demeanour highlights the archetype of the Teacher Magician, blending wisdom with compassion. This moment highlights Millie's ability to distil complex tasks into simple, actionable advice, making learning accessible

and engaging for her friends. Her calm demeanour and supportive words instil confidence in her friends, allowing them to persevere despite their initial setbacks.

Millie's patience is further demonstrated when her friend Dottie loses control of her kite:

"A gusty wind grabbed her kite and blew it into a loopy loop. The fluttering kite tail caught Dottie's blue fashion glasses, and they went flying. Millie leapt into the air, caught Dottie's glasses, and put them back on her face before she could blink."
(Kanner, 2014, p. 14)

Here, Millie's quick thinking and agility save the day, but her response goes beyond solving the immediate problem. She reassures Dottie, encourages her to try again, and helps her master the skill, demonstrating that mistakes are an essential part of the learning process. The collaborative nature of the story is most evident in the assembly of the dragon kite. Millie's grand plan relies on the unique contributions of each friend, symbolising the importance of teamwork. The transformation of individual kites into a cohesive dragon kite represents how collaboration can lead to something greater than the sum of its parts:

"First, Hai handed his kite to Millie. She pulled the lines together, and the dragon had its wings. Next, Duke and Bashir gave their kites to Millie, and the dragon had its long body. Then Millie took Dottie's kite string, and the dragon had its tail."

(Kanner, 2014, p. 26)

Each friend's kite plays an essential role in forming the dragon, showcasing how their unique talents and contributions are integral to the team's success. This process is a metaphor for how individual strengths can be harnessed to achieve a common goal, a lesson that resonates with young readers and teaches the value of collaboration.

Millie's collaborative approach contrasts sharply with the traditional Sang Kancil tales, where the Mousedeer often outsmarts others for personal gain. In *Hikayat Sang Kancil*, for instance, Sang Kancil's cunning is used to escape danger or trick adversaries, often leaving others humiliated in the process. In contrast, Millie's cleverness is directed toward helping her community thrive, making her an embodiment of the Teacher Magician archetype.

As Farrell (2019) explains, the mature Magician archetype "involves Aristotle's virtue of prudence," emphasising the use of wisdom and reason to achieve positive outcomes. Millie's ability to lead her friends through challenges while nurturing their growth aligns perfectly with this archetype. Her focus on teamwork and collective success further distinguishes her from the traditional trickster figure.

Millie's inclusivity is another hallmark of her teaching style. Her friends represent a diverse group, reflecting Malaysia's multicultural society, and she ensures that each of them feels valued and included. This is evident in her decision to involve everyone in her plan, even when some of them doubt their abilities:

"Dottie asked, 'Where's your kite, Millie?' Millie replied slyly, 'I don't know. I'm sure it will be here tomorrow.'"

(Kanner, 2014, pp. 8–9)

Millie's response is both playful and strategic. By withholding her own contribution until the right moment, she shifts the focus to her friends' efforts, encouraging them to take ownership of their roles. This approach fosters a sense of agency and pride in her friends, empowering them to overcome their insecurities and contribute meaningfully to the team.

Millie's leadership style also reflects contemporary values of inclusivity and empowerment, making her a relatable and inspiring figure for young readers. As Jeffrey (2018) explains, the Teacher Magician archetype "prosper[s] a society" by imparting knowledge and fostering growth. Millie's actions align with this role, positioning her as a mentor who uses her wisdom to uplift those around her. The dragon kite, as a collaborative creation, becomes the centrepiece of the festival and outshines the other entries, including the kite of the primary rival, Ms. Mariam. This moment not only showcases Millie's ingenuity but also reinforces the story's message about the importance of cooperation.

Additionally, Millie's friends represent the multicultural fabric of Malaysia, with characters like Dottie, Hai, Duke, and Bashir coming from diverse cultural backgrounds. This inclusivity reinforces the idea that unity and collaboration can transcend individual differences. Millie's role as a leader extends beyond her ability to solve problems. She empowers her friends by recognising their individual strengths and guiding them to work together effectively. Her leadership style is participatory rather than authoritative, reflecting the values of modern pedagogy.

"Millie beamed. Theirs was truly the best kite at the festival!"

(Kanner, 2014, p. 30)

This conclusion emphasises that Millie's success is shared by her friends, reinforcing the idea that true leadership is about uplifting others rather than seeking personal recognition. Millie exemplifies the Teacher Magician archetype through her combination of intellect, empathy, and a commitment to nurturing others. Unlike the trickster Mousedeer of traditional folklore, who often operates alone and for personal gain, Millie uses her cleverness to create harmony and foster growth within her community. As Jeffrey (2018) explains, the Teacher Magician archetype is characterised by an ability to transform individuals and communities through knowledge and guidance. Millie's stories align with this archetype, presenting her as a figure who embodies wisdom, kindness, and a sense of responsibility.

Millie the Mousedeer is a compelling reinterpretation of the Mousedeer figure, transforming the traditional trickster into a symbol of education and empowerment. Through her stories, Millie teaches lessons about teamwork, cultural pride, and ethical problem-solving, making her a relatable and inspiring figure for young readers. Her role as an educational icon aligns with the broader trend of reimagining the Mousedeer as a positive and progressive archetype, reflecting contemporary values of inclusivity, collaboration, and leadership. By emphasising Millie's role as a Teacher Magician, Kanner's stories contribute to the evolving legacy of the Mousedeer in Malaysian folklore and beyond.

CONCLUSION

The Mousedeer figure, traditionally represented by Sang Kancil in Malaysian folklore, has undergone a profound transformation in modern adaptations. Historically, Sang Kancil was characterised as a cunning male trickster, using wit to outsmart adversaries for personal gain or survival. However, contemporary narratives have reimagined the Mousedeer as a female protagonist, showcasing traits of leadership, nurturing, and collaboration. This evolution reflects changing societal values, particularly regarding gender roles, education, and environmental awareness. The reimagining of the Mousedeer archetype has broader implications for literature and society. By challenging traditional gender roles and promoting progressive values, these tales

contribute to a more inclusive and equitable cultural narrative. They also highlight the potential of folklore to address contemporary issues, such as environmental conservation and social justice, making them relevant to a global audience. Moreover, the mousedeer's transformation underscores the power of storytelling as a tool for shaping collective identities and imagined communities. These modern adaptations demonstrate how folklore can evolve to reflect societal changes while retaining its essence, ensuring its continued relevance and resonance. The Mousedeer's journey from a mischievous trickster to a wise and nurturing leader exemplifies the dynamic nature of folklore. Through the works of Madihid (2016), Shan Mughalingam (2011), and Kanner (2014), the Mousedeer has been revitalised as a symbol of empowerment, collaboration, and ecological responsibility. These stories not only honour the legacy of Sang Kancil but also pave the way for new narratives that inspire and educate. As the Mousedeer continues to evolve, it serves as a reminder of the transformative power of storytelling and its ability to reflect and shape the values of society. By embracing the Mousedeer's rich legacy while reimagining it for modern audiences, these authors have ensured that this beloved cultural icon remains a beacon of wit, wisdom, and resilience for generations to come.

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