



## READING CHARACTER IN HO MINFONG'S THE CLAY MARBLE

**Dr. Chung Chin-Yi**

(Independent Research scholar)  
National University of Singapore  
Republic of Singapore  
Singapore

### **Abstract:**

Sarun and Dara share a bittersweet relationship. At the beginning of the novel the relationship is supportive as Sarun guides and leads the family towards Nong Chan, where there is supposed to be an abundance of food and supplies. He has dreams of gathering supplies at Nong Chan such as food, rice seed and other supplies so that they can go home, repair the house, replant the fields, and start their life all over again. As a responsible elder brother, he chides her for being impatient in demanding food immediately and complaining that the rice was insufficient and cold. Eventually their relationship becomes an antagonistic one as their character growth levels head in different directions, with Dara maturing towards becoming a responsible adult and Sarun regressing into become a spoilt, temperamental and petty child-like adult.

*(Keywords: Ho Minfong, Dara, Sarun, Jantu, Character, Clay Marble)*

I am a firm admirer of Dara. She has evinced much growth throughout the novel and I admire her for the courage and strength she eventually comes to display. There are many positive character traits in her to admire, the foremost being her strength, resilience, persistence, kindness, and fortitude. Dara has grown from being a petulant, spoilt and impetuous young girl to being a mature, understanding and independent adult. We see her at the beginning of the novel as an impatient girl, callously demanding food immediately despite her brother's assurance, spoilt and insensitive. Her gradual growth begins when her family and she are separated. Alone and frightened, she has to learn to fend for herself and fight for her own survival. We cheer her on as she finds her way to the stone beam by herself, fighting hunger and loneliness and driven by a desire to be reunited with her family. She resourcefully befriends Chnay at a difficult time when she is left alone with nobody to turn to. She is



righteous as she initially does not feel comfortable with Chnay stealing food for them but adjusts to the idea by thinking that food should be shared during times of scarcity and hardship. I admire her righteousness. She demonstrates great courage in her confrontation with Kung Silor, daring to retort that she would not have gotten the food otherwise if she had not stolen it ; and daring even to ask for an opportunity to work for him. She demonstrates independence of mind and courage when she decides to defy Sarun and pack the rice supplies to return home. I admire her courage and independence of mind. She grows in spirit throughout the novel. She bravely proceeds with Nea to look for Jantu on her own and feels compassion for the wounded and crippled Duoic. Eventually when Sarun's colleague shoots Jantu, she is a pillar of strength to Jantu, comforting her and standing by her to her last breath. Finally she stands up to her brother, again demonstrating great courage by daring to point out the illogic and inconsistencies in his argument to stay, prying his conscience for killing Jantu. In all, Dara has grown and manifested great courage throughout the novel. Jantu introduces Dara to the magic marble, which will be Dara's lucky charm for the rest of the novel. From the marble, she derives strength, courage, wisdom and hope. It is only at the end of the novel that Dara will realize that the magic in the marble resides not in it, but in her. It is her firm resolve, courage, strength, and determination to overcome all odds that I admire in Dara. The odds that faced Dara were overwhelming, but despite her tender age and inexperience, she overcame them gradually by her faith in the magic marble, which actually symbolizes her eventual lesson to believe and have faith in herself; to muster strength to overcome all odds. Dara is a deserved heroine of the novel and she commands much of my respect and admiration.

Chnay is an ambivalent character whom I have mixed responses towards. Initially he seems a hateful character, cruelly and callously destroying the toy mobile that Jantu has carefully crafted and reveling in Dara and Jantu's disappointment. Eventually he evinces a softer side however when he meets Dara and finds her lost and alone, obviously in great difficulty. He tells her the whereabouts of her family and even deigns to steal food for her. I find that this kindness that he evinces is redemptive and puts him in a favourable light. He is moral as he tells Dara that he would not lie to her for salted fish and cabbage stew. I admire his morality. He bravely stands by Dara when she gets into trouble with Kung Silor. I admire his loyalty. He gives sensible advice to Dara not to stay in the open to await her



family as it is unlikely that they will return but to actively seek them out. It is such instances of kindness and sensibility and his sense of morality that garners my respect for Chnay. Another instance of his kindness is his offer and his eventual active search for Dara's family. A final instance of his kindness is the wooden cowbell he makes for Dara, to make up for all the toys he had broken in the past. The sincerity of his effort can be seen from the fact that he actually made 3 attempts at carving the cowbell, the first two attempts being failures. I admire Chnay for his compassion, kindness, and sense of responsibility. Like Dara, he has grown much throughout the novel and is shown to eventually have a conscience. His compassion can be seen from the way he grieves over Jantu by fashioning a cowbell from her. I also feel pity for Chnay because he is an orphan who lives a desolate and lonely existence. Though initially repelled by his cruelty, I eventually come to feel sorry for him when he reveals to Dara that nobody notices him or heeds him and he is practically invisible because he is an orphan. His cruelty probably arises from a sense of bitterness over the injustice that life has dealt him, he can only look on silently and wretchedly as families around him experience warmth and companionship. In all Chnay is a sympathetic character who eventually earns my respect.

I admire Jantu greatly. There are many positive character traits in Jantu that endear her to me. For example, she is kind, brave, forthright, strong, nurturing, imaginative, resourceful, insightful and mature. Jantu is a study in strength, courage and ingenuity. When we first encounter her she seems forthright and rude, remarking that Dara is ugly. We soon discover, however, that this is just a manifestation of her playful nature as she has a good and kind heart. She acts as a mentor and guide to Dara, teaching her how to get food from the food truck. She is resourceful and imaginative, as seen from the wealth of stories she has to tell Dara. She is wise as she uses folktales to demonstrate things to Dara, and practical as well. Despite being young, she evinces a wisdom beyond her years. She has a talent for creating toys and gadgets, this being further evidence of her ingenuity. It takes a lot of creativity and imagination to come up with the toys that she does. She is an idealist as she dreams of how Dara's family and hers can be joined through the marriage of Nea and Sarun. She is wise, always dispensing advice to Dara. For instance she tells Dara not to take the clay dolls and it is what is inside of you that matters, she has a good understanding of the fact that it is our memories and sensations that matter more than earthly perishable goods. Her maturity is shown to be greater than



Dara's when Dara insists on going to the food truck when they are escaping Nong Chan while Jantu thinks this is not wise. True enough, it turns out to be a false trap that explodes. She bravely accompanies Baby when it is wounded. She is a constant source of encouragement and inspiration to Dara. She creates the magic marble to give her strength to find her family, embellishing that it has magic powers even though she knows that it does not. She is firm and encouraging when she insists that Duoic gets the water by himself- she wishes to teach him independence. She insists that he try till he is able to and indeed, he succeeds. This is perhaps a measure of her own courage and determination. When she is shot, she bravely placates Dara and does not go hysterical, taking the fact that she is dying very calmly. Again as she is dying she demonstrates wisdom by noting how everything in war is just a game to the armies and warmongers. She has maturity and insight beyond her years. She astutely notes that she is hardly an enemy, and yet has been victimized by war. To her dying breath, she is a source of encouragement to Dara as she tells Dara that she is capable of helping to persuade Sarun to make the family leave for home. She dies bravely to Dara's singing in a melodramatic fashion, listening to the same lullaby she taught her. I feel great sorrow over Jantu's death because she has been inspiring throughout the novel, guiding Dara and acting as a pillar of strength towards her. If not for Jantu's inspiring example and her ingenuous idea of motivating Dara with the magic marble, Dara would not have gotten as far as she has. Jantu is indeed a role model and an inspiring character that I look up to. She is ingenuous, creative, resourceful and insightful. Jantu is the sort of character I would greatly admire as a teacher or an elder sibling.

I dislike Sarun. If Dara grows throughout the novel and achieves remarkable insight and maturity at the end of the novel, Sarun seems to undergo the reverse, degenerating from a strong and sensible character to a petty, self-centred, ambitious and unpleasant character. This culminates in the reversal of roles in the family with Dara replacing Sarun as the head of the family at the end of the novel when they have a confrontation over returning home and beginning life anew, replanting crops and starting life on the farm again. Sarun has many negative character traits which repel him from me and which I dislike. Sarun initially appears to us as a sensible and reliable older brother and head of the family. He guides and leads the family towards Nong Chan, where there is supposed to be an abundance of food and supplies. He has dreams of gathering supplies at Nong Chan such as food, rice



seed and other supplies so that they can go home, repair the house, replant the fields, and start their life all over again. He is, in this way, an idealist. He has a romantic side as he courts Nea and is shy around her initially when she distributes food. Eventually he turns cold, hard and callous by becoming a soldier. There is a hard ruthlessness about him as he insists that the family stay to watch the flag raising and his initiation as a soldier. He becomes hardened, cruel and violent as he talks only about war and weapons, how to plant land mines, target shooting, how to march around in formation. I dislike him for the cruelty that he demonstrates. He seems to have forgotten all humanity in his blind desire to become a soldier. He relishes being a soldier and has abandoned his dreams of becoming a farmer. He is selfish, insisting that his family abide by his wishes and eating up the banana fritters without sharing. Eventually his callousness leads to the death of Jantu as she is killed by his colleague in their rush to identify anyone as an enemy. His selfishness and callousness are repulsive to me as he lacks compassion and humanity. With no regard for the feelings of others, it is he who dissuades his mother from waiting for Dara at the stone beam, an instance of his cruelty and self-centeredness. He insists that Dara knows nothing about war, but we know this is false pride in an empty cause as Jantu has been killed for it, and Dara points this out. Eventually Dara's voice of reason stands stronger than his and he is persuaded to leave his soldier hood to leave for home. I dislike Sarun for his cruelty, selfishness, and petty small-mindedness. Despite being older than Dara, he is insensitive and insensible when he insists that the family stay on solely to witness his initiation to become a soldier and disregards the well being and happiness of the family which wishes to start farm life afresh by insisting that they stay solely for his sake and his desire to become a soldier. In this sense, Sarun becomes a monstrously egoistic and self-regarding character, always willing to sacrifice others for his own interests. I have no sympathy for Sarun as he is blinded by ego and self-interest.

Chnay is an ambivalent character. Initially he seems a hateful character, cruelly and callously destroying the toy mobile that Jantu has carefully crafted and reveling in Dara and Jantu's disappointment. Eventually he evinces a softer side however when he meets Dara and finds her lost and alone, obviously in great difficulty. He tells her the whereabouts of her family and even deigns to steal food for her. This reveals him to be a kind character. He is moral as he tells Dara that he would



not lie to her for salted fish and cabbage stew. He bravely stands by Dara when she gets into trouble with Kung Silor. He gives sensible advice to Dara not to stay in the open to await her family as it is unlikely that they will return but to actively seek them out. It is such instances of kindness and sensibility that garners my respect for Chnay. Another instance of his kindness is his offer and his eventual active search for Dara's family. A final instance of his kindness is the wooden cowbell he makes for Dara, to make up for all the toys he had broken in the past. The sincerity of his effort can be seen from the fact that he actually made 3 attempts at carving the cowbell, the first two attempts being failures. He is compassionate, kind, and responsible. Like Dara, he has grown much throughout the novel and is shown to eventually have a conscience. His compassion can be seen from the way he grieves over Jantu by fashioning a cowbell from her. I also feel pity for Chnay because he is an orphan is lives a desolate and lonely existence. Though initially repelled by his cruelty, I eventually come to feel sorry for him when he reveals to Dara that nobody notices him or heeds him and he is practically invisible because he is an orphan. His cruelty probably arises from a sense of bitterness over the injustice that life has dealt him, he can only look on silently and wretchedly as families around him experience warmth and companionship.

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the strain in their relationship arises when Sarun's colleague shoots Jantu. Instead of feeling guilty and caring about Jantu, Sarun cold-bloodedly insists that they wait for the vehicle after flag-raising the next day; indirectly increasing the chances of Jantu's death by disallowing them from going to the hospital immediately, and indeed, Jantu dies. This tension between them erupts into a direct confrontation with Dara questioning Sarun's defensive claim to stay on to become a soldier, claiming that it has to do with a man's courage. Dara questions his entire notion of courage, mockingly asking how much courage it took to kill Jantu. Against his illogic and inconsistency, she poses cutting questions, about how it would similarly take courage to return home and rebuild their home, fishing and farming. Against Sarun's claim that she would not understand war, Dara retorts that war is a senseless process which takes the lives of the innocent such as her father and Jantu. Their relationship reaches the height of its strain when Dara challenges Sarun's authority and proposes to go home herself and plant the next crop of rice. Dara's family members see the sense and logic in Dara's argument and back Dara up. We witness a reversal of roles as in this process Dara takes over as the head of the family. Sarun is left with no choice but to concede defeat and return home with Dara. Dara has derived strength to defeat Sarun's unreasonableness with calm logic and argument from her belief in the magic marble and conversely, herself.

The relationship between Dara and Chnay begins on a sour note as he cruelly and callously destroys the toy mobile that Jantu had created. He acts as a vicious bully to Dara in this instance and Dara is hurt and offended by him. A friendship between them however, begins to be fostered when Dara is left alone and lost with nobody to turn to and finds Chnay at the stone beam. Their relationship begins on a strained note as Chnay mocks Dara for thinking that her family would stay around to wait for her. Eventually however, Chnay opens up and helpfully provides her details of her family's whereabouts and the situation when they left. Faced with Dara's sense of loss and abandonment when she finds out that her family has left without her he is sympathetic and proffers the information that her mother was crying very hard when she left, alleviating Dara's sense of panic and loss. Dara feels sorry for him when Chnay tells Dara that he would not know which trail they took as nobody tells him anything or even sees him in his wretched and pathetic state as an orphan. He shows kindness towards Dara by offering her cold rice upon discovering that she is hungry. This is a step forward in





their relationship as Dara begins to realize a softer side to Chnay. This is further enforced when Dara realizes that Chnay is capable of smiling and he doesn't look as mean as he was as a bully. She initiates their friendship by inviting him to come along on her search for her family. Their friendship is further strengthened when Chnay offers to help Dara look for her family. In her time of crisis, Chnay is a strong pillar of support to Dara, even stealing food for Dara to keep her from starving. Initially Dara is disturbed that the food is stolen, but is placated when Chnay assures her that food is meant to be shared in times of war. Chnay stands by Dara when she gets into trouble for stealing Kung Silor's chicken and is awed by the courage that Dara displays in standing up for herself against Kung Silor. Their friendship is further strengthened when Chnay scours Kung Silor's camp for Dara's family and locates Sarun. Chnay has helped Dara greatly to tide over her crisis of being separated from her family and she owes it greatly to him that she is able to relocate them though she doubts him for a moment, arousing his indignation. The strength of their friendship is further reinforced at the end of the novel when Chnay delivers Dara the gift of a cowbell as he feels guilty about all the toys that he had destroyed. Chnay has been a pillar of support to Dara for the most difficult time of crisis in her journey and their friendship has grown and become strong.

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