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Reading the Romantic Syair: Women's Popular Literature in Nineteenth-Century Riau.

Narrative poems or syair featuring heroines who disguise themselves as men and go to the rescue of their husbands were among the most popular printed books in Malay in the late nineteenth century. The manuscript evidence suggests that these poems were similarly popular in earlier decades, especially in the Riau region. Modern critics describe such works as having a merely entertaining or 'soothing' (menglipur lara) function, while commentators at the time condemned the intoxicating fantasies such fictions induced in readers. But is there a more profound reason for the popularity of this type of syair? Using anthropological studies of emotion in the Malay-Indonesian world, the syair can be seen as permitting its readers a certain kind of catharsis. Moreover, psychoanalytically-informed studies of popular female reading material in other literary traditions may be used to explain some of the syair's features, such as the high degree of predictability and repetitiveness of both plot and language. The strictly temporary nature of the syair heroine's transgression of the usual gender order—she returns willingly to her subordinate position at the resolution of the narrative—may also be elucidated by comparison to similar patterns in contemporary romance novels. This paper seeks to look beyond the idea of menglipur lara, and place syair reading in the nineteenth-century Malay world in the larger context of popular romances for women.