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Swinging between traditions: tracing the origins and meanings of narrative motifs in the traditional Malay romantic poem *Syair Selindung Delima*

Syair Selindung Delima (SSD), a traditional Malay romantic poem dateable to at least the latter half of the eighteenth century if not before, belongs to the sub-genre of romantic *syair*. Its popularity is attested to by the fourteen manuscripts of the poem still extant, a substantial number for poems of this type. Like a number of other poems of the same genre such as *Syair Bidasari* and *Syair Yatim Nestapa* the main intrigue of its plot follows the abuse and suffering of a young heroine at the hands of the king's older wives, until eventually she triumphs over her adversaries, is reunited with her loved-ones, and reinstated to her rightful position. *SSD* is particularly interesting however since it includes a cluster of rather unusual motifs, the origin and meaning of which are located as a key to unlocking the puzzle of the poem's sources. The heroine swings a swing containing a special black stone and a coil of rattan, while singing of her unhappy fate. In so doing she instigates the change in her fortune, and, invoking her long-lost mother and father, her situation improves and justice is done. In searching for sources of the poem's plot and meanings of these motifs it becomes apparent that there is more to the poem than first meets the eye. The *syair's* alternating titles (in some manuscripts it is referred to as *The poem of Selindung Delima*, the main heroine's name, in others as *The poem of Seri Benian* the heroine's mother's name and yet in others it takes both of their names) provide an initial clue which, in combination with the structure of the plot, suggest that it is a composite of two stories, probably originating from different traditions, and fused together by the central motifs of the swing, stone and rattan. The primary aim of this paper is to provide some introductory comment on the likely origins and meanings of these salient narrative motifs, and in so doing shed some light on the processes of the poem's evolution, and its synthesis of both indigenous and Indian material.

In looking for possible sources of the main part of the plot of *SSD* dealing with the displaced suffering heroine *Selindung Delima*, two groups of oral tales from the Malay-Indonesian world can be distinguished which display particular equivalences to the *syair*. The first set of tales share the same core motif as the *syair*, that of the persecuted youngest heroine who suffers at the hands of six older wives or sisters. A second group of tales also relates the persecution of the heroine and, significantly they include the motif of the swing. In these oral folktales however the function of the swing is inverted. Rather than constituting the vehicle of the protagonist's salvation as it does in the poem, the swing in the folktales is the agent of her downfall. This, in short, constitutes the subject of the first part of the paper. An analysis and comparison of these motifs as they occur in the oral tales and the *syair*, will seek to illustrate that the folktales were to a greater or lesser extent indigenous prototypes of the *syair*, or at least brought some influence to bear on the subject matter of the poem.

The second part of the paper will focus on the prelude to the poem's central plot, the story of the heroine's mother *Seri Benian*. In this episode *Seri Benian* is enticed by a delicious looking pomegranate that she eats. Unbeknown to her it is an incarnation of a god *Dewa Laksana* who had transformed himself in order to seduce her and make her pregnant. Having given birth to *Selindung Delima*, *Seri Benian* leaves her daughter and ascends with *Dewa Laksana* to a heavenly realm. Before her departure

she instructs Selindung Delima that, should she ever face hardship, she should acquire a coil of rattan and a black stone from an island. It later becomes evident that the rattan plant and the black stone are incarnations of the heroine's parents. Indian sources display particular correspondences to this part of the narrative. This notion of Indian influence within traditional Malay literature is a long acknowledged fact. As scholars such as Braginsky (2001:67) have pointed out; 'It is hard to overestimate the Indian impact on the development of the South East Asian literatures both oral and written. Constant encounters with Indian merchants, craftsmen, preachers and story-tellers made possible the penetration of the richest stock of plots and motifs of Indian folklore into South East Asian popular culture and folk-literature.' Mythological and religious treatises, the Vedas, the *puranas* or 'tales of olden times', as well as texts of the Buddhist canon, and the great Indian epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, were widespread in the early states of South East Asia. They exerted an influence on the already germinating seed of local folk-literature, yielding its further cultivation through this process of cross-fertilisation. The *Prakrti Khanda*, the second book of a major Hindu *Purana*, the *Brahmavaivarta Purana*¹ for instance, contains a number of motifs central to the Seri Benian tale. In this narrative a woman, Tulasi, is seduced by the Hindu god (*dewa*) Vishnu, by means of trickery involving transformation. The god's assumption of another form results in the couple's union and transformation into a special type of black stone (*shalagram*) and a basil plant (*tulasi* is the Sanskrit for *Ocimum Sanctum*, the basil plant). Other later *puranas* such as the *Padma Purana* and the *Siva Purana* also contain variations of this story (Gupte 2000:233, Mackenzie Brown 1974:29). If this outline is compared to the Seri Benian narrative, the equivalences become obvious. Seri Benian is seduced by a heavenly creature Dewa Laksana, also by means of his deceptive transformation. Dewa Laksana's transformation, like Vishnu's, leads to the union of the couple. They depart to his heavenly realm. Seri Benian, like Tulasi becomes a plant (rattan) and Dewa Laksana like Vishnu, a black stone. These correspondences, in combination with other correlations in the description of the swinging of the black stone and rattan in the poem and living Hindu ritual traditions suggest that Indian influence is highly likely.

It is not until the closing stages of the narrative, through the Selindung Delima's swinging of the stone and rattan in order to invoke Dewa Laksana and Seri Benian, and their magical reappearance that the two story lines are interlaced and organically fused. The concluding part of the paper will consider the role of the swing and the swinging of the stone and rattan in the poem against anthropological material concerning ritual practices, folk belief and magic rites. In so doing it hopes to uncover possible origins of these motifs, and the beliefs which may have underpinned the

¹ This *Purana* is a late Medieval work of Krisnaite Vaisnavism and has long been considered to be one of latest, if not the last of major *puranas*. It displays knowledge of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, and of other major and minor *puranas*. Mackenzie Brown (1974:29) argues that the combined evidence suggests that the extant *Brahmavaivarta Purana* in its final form dates from the 15th-16th century. *Puranas* were originally transmitted orally by story-tellers or bards, and were publicly sung and recited. They underwent constant revision and elaboration, a process which continued each time they were committed to writing. It cannot be established with any certainty if an actual copy of this *Purana* made its way to the Indonesian/Malay world, or if it was disseminated in oral form by Indian bards, or Malays who had had direct contact with India. Nevertheless, the cluster of motifs obviously found its way into Malay tradition, whether through the text *per se*, or via a desecralised folk adaptation which is probably more likely.

swinging ritual. This motif of swinging is frequently found in myths, rituals, religious and magic rites of India and Southeast Asia, and the Malay and Indonesian world in particular. Details of Hindu or, more specifically, Vaisnava rituals practiced to this day in areas of the Subcontinent bear uncanny resemblances to the heroine's swinging in the poem. Yet indigenous animist and magic rites of Southeast Asia also share correspondences with the function of the heroine's swing. As the combined evidence shows the role of the swing in *SSD* can be seen to be dually motivated, bearing testimony to the synthetic nature of the poem and its fusion foreign and indigenous ritual traditions and literary motifs. The poem literally 'swings between traditions' drawing on a range of influences and uniting them within a carefully synthesised organic whole.