

Indian Influences in the Supernatural Elements Found in the Malay Classic Films of *Dewi Murni*, *Gul Bakawali* and *Selendang Delima*

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Abstract

The paper examines that the supernatural elements found in the Malay movies *DewiMurni* 1950 directed by B.S. Rajhans, *SelendangDelima* 1958 directed by K.M. Basker and *Gul Bakawali* 1963 directed by B. Narayanan Rao which are heavily embedded with Indian elements. Analysis into the films' repertoires have shown striking parallels and significant differences between the Malay films and its Indian versions. *Dewi Murni* is derived from Kalidasa's *Shakuntala*. Excerpts from the *Brahmavaivarta Purana* and *Ramayana* are used in the narration of *Selendang Delima* which is the story of a nymph's offspring who is cursed and subjected to cruelty. *GulBakawali* is obtained from a Persian story and deciphered to Hindustani in 1702 by Niphal Chand (Zainal Abidin Ahmad, 1942: 144). Sheikh Mohd. Ali bin Ghulam Hussein Alhandi (an Indian Muslim) is responsible for translating *Gul Bakawali* from an Urdu / Hindi text. Elements that have come to be accepted as the culture of the Malay world is the outcome of Indianisation in the region (Noor 2005: 32). One has to agree with Farish Noor when he states 'that the Malay world has a number of lasting legacies' (Noor 2005: 32). The pluralist culture that is now inherent amongst the Malays was deepened through a long process of socio-cultural growth and exposure to other traditions. As such, it is not surprising that encounters between native cultures namely Hinduism and Islam in their daily routines were a part of the lives of the local Malay people in the past. The study on the films *Dewi Murni*, *Gul Bakawali* and *Selendang Delima* illustrate that a fusion of culture produces films that is able to withstand the test of time and that cultural convolution is possible.

OBJECTIVES

The big screen and moving images remain one of the most powerful tools to tell a story. The filmmakers of today need to look back and draw strength and inspiration from our heritage of filmmaking in order to ensure that national unity is preserved. Malay cinema was started and given identity by Chinese magnates and Indian directors whilst the stories were given life by the Malay actors. The industry eventually became Malay based and Malay owned and as such the

contributions of Indian filmmakers to the Malay film fraternity may sooner or later be unheard of. This research, in its own limited ways, hopes to help keep the legacy of these contributors alive. There is no better medium than the cinema to portray the fabric of a nation. The paper aims to establish that the supernatural elements found in films of this study were heavily embedded with Indian influences. Elements of Indianisation were influential in the inclusion of intriguing features to the films concerned. The study focuses on ascertaining that diversity and cultural syncretism were apparent in the films of the golden era. The theory of Interculturalism is used to examine the films. Based on this theory, a connectivity is established whereby although the Malay films in study have profound Indian influences, efforts have been made to retain the native culture, in terms of language and clothing. As such the films have showcased a 'cultural mosaic' approach whereby both cultures coexisted in cultural diversity.

BACKGROUND

The film *DewiMurni* is an adaptation of Kalidasa's *Shakuntala*¹. This notion is established through the identification of chronological events that are similar to the story of *Shakuntala* authored by Kalidasa. Adaptations have been made to the Indian story, transforming it to the Malay version and prominent differences are notable. The principal story of *DewiMurni* remains the same whereby the main characters meet in unlikely surroundings, woo and get married. Both King Dushyanta and King Indraloka lose memory of their wives (in different ways), the heroines lose their signet rings and are rejected by their respective husbands at the palace court. In both stories, the rings are discovered in a fish's maw and upon its reemergence, the kings' memories of their respective wives are regained. In the end after a period of separation, the lovers are reunited. The movies on the play *Shakuntala* were directed by Elias Duncan in Tamil in 1940 and V. Shantaram in Hindi in 1943 (Rajadhyaksha and Willemsen 1994: 185). These movies were produced and released in India during the time that B.S. Rajhans began his directorial debut in this country. The story of *Shakuntala* could have been adapted by Rajhans to suit the psyche of the Malay audience.

The story of *GulBakawali* tells the tale of a young prince, Tajul Muluk who is banished by his father upon a prediction by a soothsayer that he would be the cause of his father's blindness. The prince grows up with his adoptive parents in the woods and upon a chance encounter, he unwittingly becomes the cause behind the king's (his biological father) blindness. Tajul Muluk goes on a quest to recover a magical flower, Bakawali to restore the king's eyesight. His succession to the throne and marriage to the Bakawali princess forms the rest of the story.

The movie *Selendang Delima* is based on a traditional Malay romantic poem entitled *Syair Selindung Delima* dateable to at least the latter half of the eighteenth century². The *syair* is known under interspersing titles such as *Syair Seri Bunian* or *Syair Indera Laksana Hikayat*

¹The tale of Shakuntala in the *Mahabharata* differs from that of Kalidasa's version. The difference found in Kalidasa's version in comparison with the Adiparva section of the *Mahabharata* is that Shakuntala leaves her foster home before her son is born and that Dushyanta and Shakuntala's final union takes place after a long period of separation, suffering and remorse. This is similar to that of the story of *DewiMurni*.

²Sarah HICKS (SOAS)'s electronic article entitled, *Swinging between traditions: tracing the origins and meanings of narrative motifs in the traditional Malay romantic poem Syair Selindung Delima*, 2006 at http://www.soas.ac.uk/jrc/events/tufs_soas_abstracts/file44618.pdf accessed 25-06-13.

Selindung Delima is the title of the *syair* in prose form³. The main intrigue of the plot is that of brutality and misery of a young girl at the hands of the king's old wives, and her eventual triumph over her foes and her reunion with her parents.

Ideas and Concepts Supernatural elements in the Malay belief system

The fifteenth century marks the era in which Islam was adopted by the Malays in the Malayan Peninsula. Although the Malays accepted the central teachings of Islam, they continued to preserve many of the former convictions and practices before the arrival of Islam. Some of the rituals that persevered among the people up to the mid-20th century, were that of superstition and sacred practices which was connected to the world of spirits. (McAmis 2002: 111). McAmis claims that, a conventional Muslim in that time period would comprehend God as a powerful king who abstains from the daily lives of the common folk. The people believed that their daily lives were more connected to the spirits whom they deemed as their guardians. As such, much caution was exercised by the Malays in order not to offend the spirits by their doings.

Winstedt (1951) in his study conducted in Malay villages attested that the *pawang* (local shaman) kept the repository of primal faith and superstition alive through rituals and offerings particularly that which concerned economic activities and medication. Offerings were compensated to local spirits, believed to dwell in trees, rocks, rivers and lakes and this practice was prevalent in almost all parts of Malaya. This was based on the belief that some spirits were amiable while some were vindictive. White flags or *panji* were used to identify 'holy' places and offerings of rice and flowers were made at these places to appease the good spirits. Evil spirits such as *Bahdi*, *Seligi Bota* and *Langsuye* were dreaded and evaded with caution (Hotchener 1932 : 225).

The Malays amalgamated the teachings of Islam and the practice rituals which they accommodated to their new faith. The story of Luqman Hakim is an example of how the Malays altered the Islamic teachings to integrate with their Pre- Islamic beliefs and customs. Luqman Hakim was believed to be the first wizard who lived in the sky. His lineage was said to be from that of Adam and Eve, and was assumed to be the brother of Lord Siva. According to the story, the Angel Gabriel was commanded by God to upset Luqman as a punishment for his arrogance. As such pages of Luqman's books were strewn at sea and those who found these pages were blessed with comprehension to become mediums in the country (Winstedt 1951: 41). This story goes on to prove that the teachings of Islam were altered and combined with the sacraments of the old faith, leading to the beliefs in spirits and supernaturals, continuing to infiltrate the lives of the Malays of the yesteryears.

Supernatural elements in *Dewi Murni*

In the film *DewiMurni*, mystical elements are introduced from the very beginning. The introduction of the mystic who is able to foresee the misfortune that is to befall King Indraloka and Murni enthralls the audience. He walks past King Indraloka and Murni while singing of the impending doom that is to befall them. This forewarning catalyzes the curiosity of the audiences who are left wondering as to what is the catastrophe that is to befall the couple.

³Obtained and translated from the references at Pusat Rujukan Pesuratan Melayu 2008-2013 Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.

The most supernatural element of *DewiMurni* is the use of witchcraft to cast a spell that causes King Indraloka to forget Murni. The use of magician is very much an idea that originated from the time period before the arrival of Islam. The Malay magicians are shown to invoke the Hindu gods, Vishnu the preserver, Brahma the creator, Batara Guru (Kala) and S'ri in Malay folklore (Endicott 1985 : 27). The use of the magic potion becomes a dramatic element that enables the audience to establish a perception of the movie and the theme of love it is presenting. According to K.M. Endicott the Malays interest in the subject of love was reflected in their "extensive body of love magic". They worked on gaining control of a person's will by taking control of their soul and trapping them to the initiator of the magic. The Malays way of life is scarcely untouched by magic and is an integral part of their way of life (Endicott 1985 : 27).

The jinx cast by the sorcerer was instrumental in causing Murni's and Indraloka's separation but an important element of the movie is that God's power precedes all and even the most potent of potions lose their power next to God's will. As such, it was God's will that the signet ring be caught in the fish's maw and found by Noto, resulting in the spell being broken and the couple reunited. At the end of the movie the sage's words on the will of god reinforces the idea that God's will is ultimate.

"dukacita nestapa tuanku berdua sudah musnah[...]sang dewa bahagiakan tuanku berdua" (your highnesses troubles are over... the gods will gave you happiness).

Supernatural elements in *GulBakawali*

The Malays are of Muslim faith but their livelihood is infused with traditional and cultural beliefs which originate from the relics of Hinduism which once dominated this region for centuries.

In the movie *Gul Bakawali*, supernatural elements are put forth in this Islamic story from the beginning through the appearance of a sage who has the ability to predict the future which has a strong basis on the Hindu idea of *jodhitam* (Hindu astrology). This aspect of divination is further stressed through the character of the palmist who predicts Tajul Muluk's future which results in him (Tajul) going on a quest to locate the *Bakawali* flower. Tajul is predicted to hold the ability to blind his father just by looking at him (the father) and this forms the most supernatural aspect of the story. A child who is predicted to blind his father is banished from the kingdom but as predicted the curse materialises in accordance to the prediction and this supernatural element is well presented in the movie.

Another form of supernatural element that is utilised in the movie is the use of the amulet which Tajul kisses and uses to protect himself. The amulet possesses the ability to tame dangerous snakes and also defeat demons who attack Mubarak in the cave. Tajul also uses the amulet to gain entrance into the *Bakawali* princess's palace. The use of an object as a protection is derived from animistic beliefs and is embedded in the practices of the Malay community. According to Mohd Taib Osman (1985) in the Malay belief system, there are at least five different sections of belief, of which belief in witchcraft, supernatural powers, animals and objects that are considered *keramat* (thaumaturgic) are ingrained in their way of life.

The highlight of the supernatural element in the movie *GulBakawali* is the idea that the *bakawali* flower possesses supernatural powers. The *bakawali* flower only blooms after

midnight and is very fragrant. It takes a year to bloom and the flower starts wilting after three hours. This rare phenomenon could be the reason for the flower to be associated with mysticism. The Malays believe that the *bakawali* flower is guarded by *orang bunian* (elves) or by *deva dari kayangan* (gods from heavens) and as such the idea of looking for a rare flower which is guarded by a princess adds mystery to the already intriguing tale. In the last scenes, the flower is shown to possess powers only if it is used by the very person who plucks it and its ability to cure blindness enhances the supernatural element which is the underlying theme of the movie.

Supernatural elements in *Selendang Delima*

The movie *Selendang Delima* is rooted with mystical elements. *Batara Guru* is summoned by the students who are under the tutelage of a *guru* (teacher) to protect and keep them from harm's way. "...*Om...kita mesti sentiasa ingat pada batara guru...jauhkan perkara yang tidak baik...*". The *guru* uses a bowl of water to project concrete images that show current events which is part of the supernatural elements that add mystique to the story of *Selendang Delima*.

The mythical bird *garuda* emerges from an erupting volcano. The *garuda* is big and uses its talons to lift people off the grounds. The *garuda* is pictured to possess supernatural powers, and the idea that it can only be killed by magic is put forth. The *garuda* is a legendary humanoid bird in the relics of Hinduism, the mount of the Hindu God Lord Vishnu, but in the movie *Selendang Delima* it is shown as a ferocious killer that could only be defeated by a being with mystic powers.

Supernatural elements in the movie are further emphasised in the scenes whereby Dewa Laksana shrinks himself and enters a pomegranate fruit and Sri Banian being magically lifted to the heavens. Sri Banian's pregnancy is also part of a supernatural element as she becomes pregnant immediately after eating the pomegranate fruit. She is never shown to be pregnant and her child is magically conceived and delivered on the same day. *Selendang Delima*, the magical child, is bundled in a magical *selendang* (shawl) that is to protect her.



Figure1 – DewaLaksana in a pomegranate fruit, sourced from

<http://filemklasikmalaysia.blogspot.com/2011/03/selendang-delima-1958.html>, accessed on 12-02-12

The magical trunk, a creation of Dewa Laksana in which SelendangDelima is hidden by her mother, has the ability to allow the child to breathe and grow in it adds to the element of magic in the film. The trunk is introduced to the audience again when Bang Segara's inquisitive wives decide to pry it open and its magical features come to light, when the child of ten or twelve is found in it, fully clothed in finery and has knowledge of her lineage. Dewa Laksana's explanation that the trunk is magical, provides the vital information as to how she was able to survive all these years in it. "[...] *petikesaktian yang beta telahciptakan[...]*" (the magical chest that I had created). The trunk provided the magical element which was essential for the storyline.

The rattan and black stone are also objects of mythical elements. DewaLaksana and Sri Banian are cursed to turn into these objects. There is a necessity for these objects to be intersected in the storyline. SelendangDelima receives an "*alamat*" (tidings) that her parents are in an island called PulauBandu and have been cursed. At the island, the girl is shown paying homage to the stone and rattan stick by singing a song which results in DewaLaksana and Sri Banian's curse being broken. The mystical elements centring around these events add value to the mythical story of *SelendangDelima*.

In the closing stages of the plot sequence of *Selendang Delima*, the girl SelendangDelima is shown swinging the rattan stick and black stone. Her swinging invokes Sri Banian and Dewa Laksana. The audiences are made to understand that the rattan stick and black stone are actually the parents of SelendangDelima. In the myths, rituals, religious and magic rites of India, Southeast Asia and the Malay and Indonesian world the notion of swinging is found. This swinging is connected to the Hindu festival of the swing, *Jhulan Purnima*, a solar ceremony which is performed in the middle of March in honor of the God Krishna (Prabupadha: 1986). The to and fro motion of the swing is symbolically considered in Hinduism to bring elation and enable one to discard worries. As such, in the movie *Selendang Delima*, the girl (Selendang Delima) swings the black stone and rattan stick in hopes that her parents are invoked and her (Selendang Delima's) worries and hardships come to an end. Hindu influence is further established to the idea of supernatural elements in the scenes whereby Dewa Laksana prays to his father and is magically bestowed with a bow and arrows to kill the *garuda* which can be sourced from the idea of Rama (with a bow and arrow) of the *Ramayana*.

Conclusion

The Malay films *Dewi Murni*, *Gul Bakawali* and *Selendang Delima* are in actualisation, traditional Malay folktales infused with Indian influences, featuring supernatural elements and a story with an underlying moral and this can be observed in all three films. The study proves that the films chosen showcase heterogeneity and cultural amalgamation whereby Indian influences are assimilated with Malay values and this can be perceived in the supernatural elements which indirectly benefit the interculturalism theory whereby Indian values are observed in the Malay culture.

The research intends to rekindle the effort to preserve classical films as these films were filmed on minimal funds, and feature the kind of cinematography that contemporary spectators would have considered conservative and unimpressive. Although this is so, the Malay films in

discussion have preserved their allure till date as they were produced for an audience that didn't need faultless technological trickery to ignite their imagination. As such, films that actually show the amalgamation of cultures will stand the test of time as exemplified in these films.

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