

# ‘Birds of a Feather Flock Together’: *The Comparison Between Two Folklores* **Bawang Merah Bawang Putih and Putri Arabella**

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**Abstract**—Folklore found in Indonesia has a moral value that is beneficial for its readers or listeners. The folklores occasionally have similarities with folklores from other regions both in terms of the intrinsic and extrinsic elements of the works. For example, folklores *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih* from Indonesia and the story of *Putri Arabella* from Malaysia share similarities in terms of intrinsic elements and moral values. This study attempts to investigate the comparison of these folklores using a comparative literary theory. Three main intrinsic elements that are compared include characters and characterizations, settings, and plot. Meanwhile, the comparison of the moral values between the two folklores is focused on individual moral, social moral, and religious moral. The study shows that the intrinsic elements of *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih* stories have several connections with *Putri Arabella* from Malaysia, other than the moral values of the two stories. However, there is also a difference found between the two stories especially in the ending part of the story.

**Keywords:** *Indonesia and Malaysia folktale, intrinsic elements, moral values*

## I. INTRODUCTION

In studying folklore, many interesting aspects can be discussed. For example, how come a story existed in two different countries but have a similar narration. The similarity has existed in several aspects. One of them is the migration process carried out by a group of people and an identical geographical situation (Fitriana, 2015).

In the process of migration, a group of people has the potential to bring their culture from their homeland and assimilate to the local culture in the destination country. Usually, the folklore that is brought from the homeland will be different from the one in the destination area of the migration (Rahmat, 2018). However, as stated above, the similarity that occurs is not merely caused by the migration process, but also due to identical geographical location or situation. Identical geographical situations tend to produce literary works with similar forms and themes (Damono, 2005).

The similarity encourages researchers to conduct comparative literary research to seek more similarities between the two folklores. In comparative literary studies, several

specifications and requirements must be fulfilled by research to be called comparative literary research. They are: (1) the language of the literary works must be different, (2) if the literary works are written in the same language, they must be originated from different country, (3) if the literary works are in one country, the language used must be different, and (4) the literary works must have some issues in common (Jost, 1974; Koelb & Noakes, 1988; Cao, 2014).

In this study, researchers chose to compare the intrinsic elements and the moral values of Indonesian folklore *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih* (hereinafter BMBP) and Malaysian folklore's *Putri Arabella* (hereinafter PA). This research belongs to the first specification and requirement; the language of the literary works must be different. BMBP folklore is written in the Indonesian language whilst the PA is written in the Malay language. It should be noted that these two tales have been published in print publication so they were not obtained through the interview process.

Comparative Literature is very beneficial especially to comprehend the history and cultural development of neighbor countries like Indonesia and Malaysia. Through this study, we can see how the process of assimilation between literary works with local cultural values that embody them. So with this, we can understand how unique the process of attraction between literature and that national genius. This difference will eventually enrich literary forms around the area.

## II. METHOD

This study tried to obtain a profound interpretation and understanding of the values, thoughts, behaviors, ideas, and social context of cultural product namely folklores. The data in this study are in the form of words, phrases, sentences (not numbers). The data were sourced from speech and narration in literary works. On these grounds, this study is a qualitative one (Taylor, Bogdan & DeVault, 2015).

Two folklores titled *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih* (BMBP) and *Putri Arabella* (PA) were selected as a comparison object. Although both come from two different countries and languages (Indonesia and Malaysia), they are still in the ‘cognate’ category. The geographical and historical closeness

between the two is believed to be the intangible factors that determine the range of interpretation of the two literary works.

Data were analyzed with several stages such as in-depth reading, codification, classification, description and conclusion drawing. By combining the perspectives of French and American Comparative Literature (Remak, 1961; Clements, 1978), the parameters used as a guide for both works are intrinsic elements and moral values.

### III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

#### A. *Analysis of Intrinsic Elements of Bawang Merah Bawang Putih (Indonesian) and Putri Arabella (Malaysian)*

##### 1) *Comparison of Character and Characterization*

If it is observed from the number of main characters in the two folklores, the difference is noticeable. There are two main characters in BMBP, namely, Bawang Merah and Bawang Putih, whereas in PA folklore there is only one main character, namely Putri Arabella. However, even though they are different in terms of the number of main characters, these two tales still have similarities. The main characters in BMBP and PA have stepsisters. Bawang Merah is a step-sister of Bawang Putih and Putri Arubella and Putri Aribella are the stepsisters of Putri Arabella.

Bawang Putih is a common type of protagonist queen, a kind-hearted, responsible, diligent and polite young girl. She does all the domestic works diligently and serves older people generously. Bawang Putih is considered to be the main character because her appearance in the story is dominant compared to Bawang Merah and other characters. This refers to the opinion of Nurgiyantoro (2010) that the main character is the most dominantly told, both as the perpetrator of the incident and the person who is subject to the incident. The researchers provide the quotes of the folklore that shows the characterization of Bawang Putih as follows:

*Bawang Putih memang anak yang rajin  
Tanpa dimintak nenek, dengan sigap dia  
membantu. Semua peralatan rumah  
dicuci sampai licin [...]  
Lantai yang kotor segera disapu  
(BMBP, p. 30)*

The characterization of Bawang Putih in BMBP folklore shares some similarities with Arabela in PA story. Arabella is said to have a kind heart. She is also an animal lover and polite. However, the difference between these two tales is that in BMBP the characterization of the main character is more detailed, whereas, in PA, the characterization is conveyed in general. The characterization of PA is not written but researchers can conclude the personality of Putri Arabella from the following quotes.

*Puteri Arabella ingin sahaja mengadu  
nasibnya kepada ayahandanya. akan  
tetapi, apabila mengenangkan ugutan  
daripada bonda dan kakak-kakak tirinya  
yang ingin mencederakan dua ekor  
arnab kesayangannya, dia berasa takut*

*dan hasratnya terpendam begitu sahaja  
(PA, p. 5)*

*Puteri Arabella mengangkat sembah di  
hadapan Raja Aryani, pemilik negara  
Pawanadewa. Raja Aryani terpegun  
dengan kecantikan dan kesopanan  
peribadi Puteri Arabella, lalu baginda  
pun bersetuju dengan hasrat  
anakandanya (PA, p. 23)*

There is also the character of stepsisters of the main characters in these two tales. The first one is Bawang Merah (in BMBP) and the second are Putri Arubella and Putri Aribella (in the PA). In BMBP, Bawang Merah is said to have a bad attitude, such as hypocrisy, jealousy, cruel, complaining, not caring about other people's difficulties, lazy and shameless. There are several quotes that show the characterization of Bawang Merah as follows.

*Nenek tua sayang dengan anak yang  
berbakti. Memberi hadiah labu berisi  
emas permata. Bawang Merah dan  
ibunya iri hati. Melihat barang-barang  
berharga yang menyilaukan mata  
(BMBP, p. 36)*

*Singkat kata, Bawang Merah pun diajak  
menginap. Bawang Merah dan nenek tiba  
digubuk tua. Bawang Merah berkeluh  
kesah memasuki gubuk pengap. Tanpa  
sedikit pun merasa kasihan kepada  
nenek tua (BMBP, p. 40)*

The characterization of Bawang Merah is analogous to the characterization of Putri Arubella and Putri Aribella. In spite of that, in PA folklore, the characterization of each stepsister is not written. After reading the whole story it can be concluded that Putri Arubella and Putri Aribella are evil-hearted and sadistic. It can be proven through the following quote.

*... dia selalu diseksa oleh bonda tirinya  
dan dua saudara tirinya  
apabila Sultan Iskandar Shah pergi ke  
luar kota  
(PA, p. 2)*

In addition to the main characters and their stepsisters, there are also the characters of the stepmother in each folklores. These two stepmother is featured with bad manner and they like to torture the main protagonist character. Besides, they are also hypocritical and greedy. The following quotes are the proof of the stepmothers' characterization.

*Nenek tua sayang dengan anak yang  
berbakti. Memberi hadiah labu berisi  
emas permata. Bawang Merah dan  
ibunya iri hati. Melihat barang-barang  
berharga yang menyilaukan mata  
(BMBP, p. 36)*

*Akan tetapi, tidak pula buat bonda tiri  
Puteri Arabella. Dia hanya berpura-  
pura sedih. Dia telah merancang untuk  
menikmati kemewahan yang  
ditinggalkan oleh Raja Iskandar shah  
bersama dua orang anak kandungnya*  
(PA, p.10—11)

Furthermore, there is also an old-male character (father figure) in each folklore. In both stories, the father is described as merciful person and kind-hearted. As stated before, only the figures that have been explained above are found in the two tales. However, it is only those main characters compared by the researchers.

## 2) Setting

### a) Place Setting

This feature is totally different between both folklores. The place setting in BMBP is contrary to the setting in PA story. In this PA, there is only one setting identified: in an unknown village. The people is modest one. It is evident from the job of Bawang Putih's father as the merchant.

*Zaman dahulu kala di sebuah desa  
Tinggallah sebuah keluarga bahagia  
Meski ayah Bawang Putih hanya  
pedagang biasa.  
Namun, mereka hidup rukun tak kurang  
apa  
(BMBP, p.2)*

*Tinggallah kini Bawang Putih bersama  
ayahnya saja. Saat ayah bekerja,  
Bawang Putih sering kesepian di rumah.  
Melihat Bawang Putih yang selalu  
bermuram durja  
Sang ayah menjadi berat hati bila harus  
meninggalkan rumah  
(BMBP, p.6)*

Unlike the setting of BMBP, the story of PA is much more splendid. In PA, there are four settings found: in a country called Indrapura, in the palace, in the wilderness, and the Pawanadewa palace. There is no similarity in each setting of both folklores. The researchers enclose some quotes related to the setting in the folklore of Putri Arabella.

*Pada zaman dahulu, dalam sebuah  
negara yang bernama Indrapura,  
tinggallah seorang sultan yang bernama  
Sultan Iskandar shah bersama isteri dan  
tiga orang putrinya. Salah seorang  
puterinya yang diberi nama Puteri  
Arebella merupakan puteri yang sangat  
cantik (PA, p.1)*

*Setelah berhari-hari sesat dan berjalan  
di dalam hutan, Puteri Arabella berasa  
sangat keletihan. Puteri Arabella  
tertidur di bawah seponon pokok yang  
besar dan rending (PA, p.13)*

The difference in setting of place is predominantly influenced by the form of government of the two countries. Indonesia is a republic state that adopts a system of equality between its citizens. This is evidenced from one of the precepts of the five principles of Indonesia which state "social justice for all the people of Indonesia" (Butt & Lindsey, 2012). On the other hand, Malaysia is a royal state (monarchy) which elevates the rank of noble families above ordinary people.

BMBP story takes place in a village whereas Putri Arabella fairy tale occurs in a country named Indrapura. Bawang Merah lives in a simple house whilst Putri Arabella lives in a glamour palace. In contrast to the setting of Bawang Merah Bawang Putih which occurs in a river and an old hut, the folklore of Putri Arabella takes place in the wilderness and another palace called Pawanadea Palace. The disparity reflected in the setting of place will affect the type of conflict that arises between these two stories.

### b) Time Setting

There is no clear explanation about the time setting such as the years, days, and circumstances that refer to the specific period found in these two stories. However, the time setting of these two folklores is similar in general. Both take place in ancient times. This can be proven through the following quote.

*Zaman dahulu kala di sebuah desa  
(BMBP, p.2)*

*Pada zaman dahulu, dalam sebuah  
negara yang bernama Indrapura,  
(PA, p.1)*

### c) Social Setting

From the perspective of social settings, these two tales are diverse. The BMBP folklore is written to occur in the middle-class social background whilst the PA story happens in the upper classes or noble social environment. This can be proven from the following quotations.

*Zaman dahulu kala di sebuah desa  
tinggallah sebuah keluarga bahagia,  
meski ayah Bawang Putih hanya  
pedagang biasa  
Namun, mereka hidup rukun tak kurang  
apa .  
(BMBP, p.2)*

*Pada zaman dahulu, dalam sebuah  
negara yang bernama Indrapura,  
tinggallah seorang sultan yang bernama  
Sultan Iskandar shah bersama isteri dan  
tiga orang putrinya. Salah seorang  
puterinya yang diberi nama Puteri  
Arebella merupakan puteri yang sangat  
cantik. (PA, p.1)*

From the two quotations above it can be seen that the family of BMBP is just an ordinary merchant family which indicates that they come from middle-class society. On the contrary, from

the second quote, it can be concluded that Putri Arabella's father is a king (Sultan in the Malay Kingdom). Thus, Putri Arabella's family comes from the upper class or the noble class.

### 3) Plot

In terms of plot, these two tales are comparable. Both of these fairy tales have conventional or forward plots. In the initial stages, both told tells the background of the main characters of each fairy tale. This can be proven through the following quote.

*Zaman dahulu kala di sebuah desa  
Tinggallah sebuah keluarga bahagia.  
Meski ayah Bawang Putih hanya  
pedagang biasa.  
Namun, mereka hidup rukun tak kurang  
apa.  
(BMBP, p.2)*

*Pada zaman dahulu, dalam sebuah  
negara yang bernama Indrapura,  
tinggallah seorang sultan yang bernama  
Sultan Iskandar Shah bersama isteri dan  
tiga orang putrinya. Salah seorang  
puterinya yang diberi nama Puteri  
Arebella merupakan puteri yang sangat  
cantik (PA, p.1)*

After the initial stage where both folklores tell the background of the main characters, they enter the middle or full stage of a conflict. The conflict experienced by Bawang Putih and Putri Arabella was identical in terms of perpetrators. It comes from the stepmothers and stepsisters. This can be proven through the following quote:

*Bawang Putih hampir tidak pernah  
beristirahat.  
Semua pekerjaan di rumah harus  
dilakukan.  
Dari pagi hingga malam bekerja  
memeras keringat  
Hanya supaya sang ibu tiri mau  
memberikan makan.  
(BMBP, p.14)*

*Puteri Arabella selalu dipaksa  
menggantikan tugas dayang menyapu  
sampah dan membersihkan taman di  
sekeliling istana, memaksanya  
membasuh persalinan harian bonda tiri  
dan kakak-kakaknya. Paling  
menyedihkan, dia dipaksa tidur di  
kandang kuda (PA, p.3)*

Entering the final stage or the stage of conflict resolution, the ending of the story is reaching to a brighter side of the story. At the end of the story, after various tortures received, Bawang Putih and Putri Arabella got a happy ending. In the story of BMBP, at the end of the story, it is told that Bawang Putih got a treasure because of her kindness. Whereas, at the end of PA

folklore, it is said that Putri Arabella is married to a prince and live peacefully ever after.

However, there is a slight difference in the end part of both folklores. In BMBP, the fate of her stepmother and the stepsister is described. In contrast, the final stage of the PA story only focuses on the destiny of Putri Arabella who finally lived a happy life. However, the fate of the stepmother and the stepsisters of Putri Arabella is not written.

### B. Comparative Analysis of Moral Values between Bawang Merah Bawang Putih (Indonesian) and Putri Arabella (Malaysian)

#### 1) Individual

In terms of individual moral values, there are some similarities between the two folklores. Both folklores suggest the readers obey older people, to be a good person and to be sincere in accepting any obstacles in life. However, there is a difference between the two stories. In the BMBP story, there are the values of being brave and working hard. Meanwhile, in the Putri Arabella folklore, there is the value of being polite to anyone.

#### 2) Social Morals

These two tales teach different social values. In the BMBP story, the readers are taught to help others. It is proven when Bawang Putih helps the grandmother to clean up. In contrast, in the PA story, the readers are taught to be polite to anyone, especially to the older ones. It can be seen when Putri Arabella raised her prayer before King Aryani, which made King Aryani stunned by Putri Arabella's politeness.

#### 3) Religious Morals

In terms of religious morals, these two stories are identical. Both of these tales teach readers to be sincere in accepting all tests and trials from God Almighty and believe that if we go through each trial patiently and sincerely we will end up with a good reward. It can be seen when Bawang Putih has a pumpkin filled with wealth and Putri Arabella is married to a prince and lives peacefully forever. Essentially, these tales teach readers to be a good person, patient, and sincere in accepting all the crucibles from God Almighty.

### IV. CONCLUSION

After comparing both BMBP (Indonesia) and PA (Malaysia) folklores, it can be concluded that the two tales have similarities, especially in terms of characters and characterizations and plot. Whereas, the differences between these two tales are visible in the background particularly the background and social settings. Although the stories originate from different countries, it has been proven that it is also possible that there will be similarities between the two tales.

The researchers cannot determine which folklores were firstly created between these two tales. However, researchers can confirm that at least two factors are causing the similarity between the two stories: the process of migration and the similarity of geographical location or situation. This is certainly based on the location of the countries of Indonesia which is side to side to Malaysia.

Both of these folklores provide moral values that are very important to be taught to readers in terms of individual morals, social morals, and religious morals. From the perspective of individual morals, these two tales have similarities and also differences, but in terms of social morals, they are completely different. On the other hand, these two tales teach similar religious moral values.

Essentially, it can be said that these stories are identical even though there are slight differences between them. That difference is in an aspect of the local wisdom of each folklore (Pietsch & Clark, 2014). One proof of that local wisdom is, the social background of PA folklore coming from a royal family, referring to the form of government in Malaysia state. The social setting of BMBP comes from an ordinary family (not from the royal family). This is also referring to the form of the Indonesian government which is not a kingdom but a republic.

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