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### Nature Symbolism in *Bawang Merah, Bawang Putih* Revisions: An EcoFeminist Semiotics Analysis

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#### Abstract

This article combines the study of literary semiotics with that of ecofeminism to interrogate the revisions of “Bawang Merah, Bawang Putih” in the 21<sup>st</sup> century by contemporary Malaysian authors, Fazlyn Abdul Malek and Preeta Samarasan. “Bawang Merah, Bawang Putih” is a Malay folktale that has many similar nature symbols to the various Cinderella folktales worldwide. The methodology combines the branch of stylistics known as schema theory to explore the ways in which the nature symbolism in both contemporary retellings represent familial relations. For instance, symbols of the tree and the fish stand in for the deceased mother in both tales, and what it reveals about the relationship between the women in the folktale. The findings reveal that this connection between femininity and nature is not un-nuanced and that both authors have portrayed the symbolism of the tree and the fish in different ways. The implications of this research is that it reveals the ways in which “Bawang Merah, Bawang Putih” may fit within the Aarne-Uther-Thompson Index type ATU150A, apart from its very strong position in the canon of traditional Malay folklore.

*Keywords: fairytale studies, ecofeminism, semiotics, symbols, folktales.*

#### ***Simbolisme Alam Semulajadi di dalam Pengolahan Semula “Bawang Merah, Bawang Putih”: Analisis Ekofeminisme Semiotik***

#### Abstrak

Artikel ini menggabungkan kajian semiotik dengan kajian ekofeminisme untuk menyelidik cerita pengolahan baru “Bawang Merah, Bawang Putih” oleh penulis Malaysia kontemporari, Fazlyn Abdul Malek dan Preeta Samarasan. “Bawang Merah, Bawang Putih” merupakan cerita rakyat Melayu yang mempunyai beberapa simbol alam semula jadi yang hampir serupa dengan pelbagai cerita Cinderella yang terdapat di seluruh dunia di dalam versi berbeza. Metodologi kajian ini menggabungkan cabang stilistik yang dipanggil teori skema untuk menerokai bagaimana simbol-simbol pokok dan ikan melambangkan ibu yang telah meninggal dunia di dalam kedua-dua cerita yang dikaji di dalam artikel ini, dan apa yang dapat didedahkan mengenai perhubungan di antara wanita di dalam cerita rakyat ini. Dapatan artikel ini menunjukkan bahawa kaitan di antara kewanitaan dan alam semula jadi bukanlah tanpa nuansa kerana kedua-dua penulis telah menggunakan simbolisme pokok dan ikan di dalam kaedah berbeza. Implikasi penyelidikan ini adalah ia mendedahkan cara-cara bagaimana

“Bawang Merah, Bawang Putih” boleh dikategorikan di bawah Aarne-Thompson-Uther Index-type ATU150A selain daripada kedudukan cerita tersebut di dalam cerita rakyat tradisi Melayu.

*Kata Kunci:* kajian cerita dongeng, ekofeminisme, semiotik, simbolisme, cerita rakyat.

## 1. Introduction

This article combines the study of literary semiotics with that of ecofeminism to interrogate the revisions of Bawang Putih, Bawang Merah in the 21<sup>st</sup> century by contemporary Malaysian authors, Fazlyn Abdul Malek and Preeta Samarasan. “Bawang Merah, Bawang Putih” is a Malay folktale that has many similar nature tropes to the various Cinderella-adjacent folktales worldwide. Maria Tatar (1999) notes that in the Aarne-Thompson-Uther index there are listed “two distinct Cinderella tales: AT 510A (“Cinderella”) and AT 510B (“The dress of Gold, of Silver, and of Stars, also known as “Catskin”) (p.102) . Tatar (1999) avers that although the two narratives seem unrelated “at first glance”, in fact both plots are “driven by the anxious jealousy of biological mothers and stepmothers who subject the heroine to one ordeal of domestic drudgery after another” (p. 102). For the purposes of this article, however, the analysis will focus on the Malay variant titled “Bawang Merah, Bawang Putih”, which falls under the umbrella of ATU 510A. Apart from intergenerational rivalry, there are other components of this fairy-tale type that exists across culture, primarily in the connection between the biological mother, the tree and the fish that appears in some versions, such as in the aforementioned “Bawang Merah, Bawang Putih”. These nature tropes are significant as they connect to feminine imperatives, motherhood and self-preservation.

This article argues that there are deeper ecofeminist significances in these retold folktales that may be better discerned through an ecofeminist analysis which incorporates elements of stylistics and semiotics in order to unearth the ways in which nature tropes are narrated in Fazlyn Abdul Malek and Preeta Samarasan’s revisioning of “Bawang Merah, Bawang Putih”. As mentioned, this article is concerned with the intersection of the metaphors of the tree and the fish in both tales, and the ways in which they stand in for repressed femininity and the connection between that femininity and nature, particularly in the ways in which both nature symbols become substitutes for the mother figure.

## 2. Literature Review

This literature review is mainly concerned with explicating the tradition of Malay Folklore Studies and how this connects to the fish and tree symbolism in “Bawang Merah, Bawang Putih” and in looking at previous works on the folktale and other aspects of Malay Folktale Studies. Following from this, we look at the different variants of the Aarne-Thompson-Uther Index folktale type ATU510A, the variant of the Cinderella/Aschenputtle and other tales of that ilk in the world, in which a virtuous young maiden is victimised by her stepmother and sometimes step-siblings, but is swept off her feet by a nobleman or a prince. This review will consider the folktale and fairytale ramifications of this story type as well as the deeper significances of the Nature tropes of the Tree and the Metaphor that will be deployed in the analysis section. These tropes have also been codified in more than one fairytale categorizing system such as Vladimir Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale*. Therefore, there is a strong structuralist (and semiotics) element to the categorising of folktales.

### 2.1 Malay Folklore Studies and Bawang Putih, Bawang Merah

Malay folklore studies has a rich tradition, although much of its written documentation seems to have occurred through the hands of orientalist scholars such as R. J. Wilkinson (1923) who relied heavily on regional folklore and mythology to compose *A History of the The Peninsular Malays With Chapters on Perak & Selangor*. Richard Windstedt (1961) has also written extensively on Malay folklore and ritual, with *The Malay Magician*. Windstedt’s (1961) chapter on animism is particularly helpful in considering the ecofeminist semiotic connection in the fish and tree symbolism analysed in this article. For instance, he writes of the anthropomorphic ways in which “soul of the camphor tree may appear” and this may be connected to the connection between the tree and the soul of the departed mother in “Bawang Merah Bawang Putih” (p.18). Mohd Taib Osman (1972), in writing

about the “heterogeneity of traditions which make up the culture of the Peninsular Malays” notes that it has attracted the attention of many scholars including those of “Sir Richard Windstedt’s generation” whom he avers, mainly “tackled the phenomena [...] from the historical point of view (p.219). Osman (1972) further asserts that “although Malay folk beliefs and rituals are made up of elements of diverse origins”, they essentially form “meaningful units” with cohesive ideological premises (p.220). The syncretic aspect of Malay folklore and tradition then, may lend itself to the imagery and symbolism in “Bawang Merah Bawang Putih”.

## 2.2 Past Research on “Bawang Merah, Bawang Putih”

In this article we identify “Bawang Merah, Bawang Putih” as belonging to ATU 510A and classify it as such. Following from this, we are interested in looking at the ways in which it has been discussed by regional (Nusantara) scholars. Muhammad Irfan Waquiuddin Hasanudin et al. (2021) aver that tales such as “Bawang Merah, Bawang Putih” have different variants across the Malay Archipelago from Malaysia to Indonesia (p.1). Hasanudin et al. (2021) note that there have been previous researches on the tale that have shown there to be similarities with other folktale variants, the most relevant of which would be N. Noviana Laily (2015)’s comparison between the Malay folktale type and *Frau Holle* (p.2). This comparison is significant because it appears in Samarasan’s retelling as well. The importance of Hasanudin et al. (2021)’s research lies not just in the comprehensive study of comparison between folktale types in the Malay Archipelago and beyond but in the highlighting of figurative languages (proverbs, homilies, and metaphors) in “Bawang Merah, Bawang Putih” (p.7). Hasanudin et al. (2021) also note the incorporation of “gurindam” (Malay verse) in Bawang Merah’s articulations, particularly when she is seated on the swing that is hung from the tree that grows from her mother’s bones (also seen as the bones of the fish) (pp8-9). The connection between the spirit of the deceased mother and the fish is stated significantly in Mohd Taib Osman’s (1972) retelling and analysis of the tale in *Pengkajian Sastera Rakyat Bercorak Cerita*. Osman (1972) relates that when Bawang Merah dreams of her mother, an old woman appears and tells her that her mother has been transformed into an “ikan kaloi” (fish) (p.131).

At this juncture it is important to note that the different variants are listed as either “Bawang Merah, Bawang Putih” or “Bawang Putih, Bawang Merah” and in different televised and cinematic adaptations the roles of the antagonist and the heroine switch, with the heroine sometimes named Bawang Putih and at other times Bawang Merah. Perhaps the most known version of the folktale in Malay popular culture is the film *Bawang Putih Bawang Merah* (1959), directed by S. Roomai Noor. The film was actually adapted from a novel by Salleh Ghani of the same title. This version of the tale depicts a strong visual connection between Bawang Merah (the heroine) and the tree. The influence of the film version upon subsequent versions cannot be underestimated.

According to Muhammad Nur Al-Hakim Mohamad Hanafiah et al. (2021) in a study on the polemics inherent in Malay folktales such as Bawang Merah Bawang Putih, envy and malice is an important polemic contained within the traditional folktale variant but the negative aspects of this conflict can provide a moral message for children (p.207). Nevertheless, these messages are subverted and rendered more contemporary in the retellings. As Sharifah Aishah Osman (2018) notes, tales like “Bawang Merah, Bawang Putih” correspond to inherently patriarchal ideology and therefore the women are depicted as either “dysfunctional figures in conflict with each other” or as “passive “damsels in distress” awaiting rescue by the hero (p.10). This depiction of women in the folktale is however re-imagined in both of the revised versions studied in this article and therefore the connection between the feminine and nature becomes an ecofeminist re-framing of the relationship between nature and the intergenerational relationships between women in the texts.

## 2.2 The Aarne-Thompson-Uther Index

Aarne-Thompson-Uther Index or the ATU Index is a comprehensive catalogue of folktale types used in folklore studies. The ATU Index is a categorization system and is the product of a series of revisions and expansions done by a group of folklorist scholars. The ATU Index is an essential tool in folklore studies by functioning to help narrow down a research scope when looking at specific tropes but it can also help to broaden the research by supplying more materials. The ATU Index has seven major categories: (1) Animal Tales, (2) Tales of Magic, (3) Religious Tales, (4) Realistic

Tales, (5) Tales of the Stupid Ogre, (6) Anecdotes and Jokes, and (7) Formula Tales. The mentioned categories all have smaller subcategories in them, some having more than others, the categories and subcategories are part of how the system breaks up tales to better archive them.

However, the ATU index is not without its own shortcomings. Most of the tales in the index are from Europe with a small portion dedicated to Asian tales. There is a lot of work that needs to be done in integrating stories from the global south to improve the categorization system.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Understanding EcoFeminism**

Ecofeminism emerged from the intersections of feminist related research and the various movements for social justice and environmental health, explorations that uncovered the linked oppressions of subjects like gender, ecology, race, species, and nation. Essentially, the movement is concerned with anything relating to feminism issues and nature. Nature and women, when oppressed leave ineradicable mark on both the environment and society:

Ecofeminism brings together elements of the feminist and green movements, while at the same time offering a challenge to both. It takes from the green movement a concern about the impact of human activities on the non-human world and from feminism the view of humanity as gendered in ways that subordinate, exploit and oppress women. (Mellor, 2018)

Karunambigai (2015) stated that even though ecofeminism has multidimensional perspectives, it mainly addresses the parallels between the oppression of nature and the oppression of women. Some ecofeminists tend to see women as closer to nature because they see similarities between the two such as the fertility, passivity, nurturing, femininity, prone to exploitation etc. These aspects of feminism equate many elements of nature with femininity – but this is not an unproblematic way to read nature symbols, as Samarasan has problematized with her retelling.

#### **3.2 The Significance of Signs and Symbols: Contextualising Literary Semiotics in EcoFeminism**

This article concerns itself mainly with metaphors and symbolism, insofar as the repeated symbolism within these narratives show some significances. The connection between literature and linguistics has been called “literary linguistics” and this incorporates both the fields of stylistics and of semiotics. Both have different ways of looking at the nature of signs and figurative language which is incorporated in symbols, signs, metaphors and metonymy. For the purposes of this article’s analysis we incorporate semiotics in our ecofeminist interrogation of the connection between the nature metaphors in two retellings of “Bawang Merah, Bawang Putih” which shows the underlying struggle of women within patriarchy to achieve dominance. The various types of oppression suffered not just by the two half-siblings but the women in the tales are signified by the positioning of the tree and the fish as connected to each other (both the fish and the tree signifying a dead mother). Jonathan Culler (1981) writes that semiotics “enables us to perceive in recent intellectual activity a general tendency, variously stated and of differing degrees of explicitness, to stress, the role of symbolic systems in human experience,” (p.29). Therefore, semiotics allows for the thinking “in terms not of autonomous objects but of systems of relations.” (Culler, 1981, p.29). Semiotics subsequently empowers the endeavours of exploiting “these insights systematically by identifying and investigating a variety of sign systems” (p.29). This approach is particularly relevant for this study because of the intrinsic connection between the fish and the tree which acts as a substitution for a deceased mother. And indeed, there is a connection between structuralism, semiotics and the study of folktales and myth. Culler (1981) asserts that this is precisely what Levi-Strauss is doing by “isolating fundamental oppositions, such as raw-cooked, day-night, sun-moon”, by which he is enunciating codes, demonstrating that “within the most bizarre incidents can be found categories which, because of their relations to other categories within codes, have an expressive function” (p.33). This method has become a “fundamental principle of structural and semiotic analysis” (Culler, 1981, p.33). There are other signifiers within these tales, such as the colour metaphors of red (Bawang Merah, or the red shallot) and of white (Bawang Putih, or garlic), which seems to be interchangeable as colour metaphors that signify either virtue or malice. The colour metaphors are present as a binary relationship that both of the authors studied in this article utilise to highlight the

nuances in the relationship between the sisters and the mothers in this folktale. Therefore, the colour metaphors are directly connected to the dynamics of the familial relationships within the folktale.

There have been other works connecting semiotics to eco-feminism, which is a natural progression, given that ecofeminist literary analysis is related to nature imagery and figurative languages. Mary Vidya Porselvi (2020), in an analysis of Indian classical literature called her approach “ecofemiotics” which she avers, “denotes the conglomeration of Ecofeminism and Semiotics” (p.7). From the perspective of a neighbouring school of analysis, there is also ecofeminist stylistics which implies the possibility of an approach that leans towards an ecofeminist multimodal stylistics given that there are multifarious ways in which semiotics and stylistics continue to lean into each other. An example can be found in the ecofeminist stylistics analysis conducted by Krishna (2013) which is focused on the analysis of stylistic elements in Indian literature. Because ecofeminism lends itself to the connection between metaphors and symbolism of nature to the feminine, it is a logical progression to consider the semiotics and structural implications of these associations.

### 3.3 The Symbolism of Trees in ATU510A

There are many significances attached to trees in cultures across the world but significantly in the ATU510A type, the tree becomes synonymous with the mother. In *Aschenputtel* by the Brothers Grimm, for instance, there is a substitution of the spirit of the dead mother with the tree and with the bird that lives with the tree. Before the passing of her mother, she had asked the daughter to plant a tree on her grave and had given her guarantee that she would always help her as long as she remains pure hearted:

... “Dear child, I must leave you, but when I am up in heaven, I shall look after you. Plant a little tree on my grave, and whenever you wish for something, shake I, and you’ll have what you wish. And whenever you are otherwise in predicament, then I’ll send you help. Just stay good and pure. (69)

Cinderella planted the tree, and she did not even need to water it as her tears were enough nourishment for the tree. Years later, when Cinderella wanted to go to the ball but was instead made to sort the lentils and the peas by her stepsisters, the birds that were helping her told her if she wanted to go to the ball, all she needed to do was to shake the tree and her wish would come true:

Peck, peck! Peck, peck! It all went so quickly as if twelve hands were there. And when they were finished, the pigeons said: “Cinderella, do you want to go and dance at the ball?”

“Oh, my God!” she cried out. “But how can I go there in my dirty clothes?”

“Go to the little tree on your mother’s grave. Shake it and wish for clothes. However, you must return before midnight.”

So, Cinderella went to the grave, shook the little tree, and spoke:

“Shake and wobble, little tree!

Let beautiful clothes fall down to me.” (72)

In a wish-fulfilment of her dead mother’s promise, the tree granted Cinderella’s desire. Cinderella used the tree twice more, once when she comes back from the ball, changing back into her regular clothes and another time the next day, before heading out to the ball again.

From the perspective of “*Bawang Merah, Bawang Putih*”, there is a significance in that the substitution of tree for mother may be connected to the proto-Malay animistic beliefs of spirits and *keramat* interred in certain plants and trees (Windstedt, 1961, p.14). Windstedt (1961) states that this is “sympathetic or mimetic magic” (pp.14-15), one which attributes souls or supernatural properties to objects and plants, such as the “soul of the camphor tree” (p.18). Although these animistic beliefs are not at the forefront in more contemporary texts, the substitution of actions or things for spirits and otherworldly beings remain in the texts as semiotic imprints. These connections may be found in

folktales across the world as Vladimir Propp, who lay down the groundwork for structuralism with his *Morphology of the Folktale* was well aware. Propp was not the only scholar to connect language to fairytale and folktale metaphors. As Culler (1981) notes, Levi-Strauss has argued that anthropologists can learn a lot from linguistics, because it reveals that phenomena may be considered as “manifestations of an underlying system of relations” (p.31). Therefore, the semiotics analysis in this article focuses on the connection between the symbolism of the tree and the fish in the corpus.

### 3.4 Mythical Fish Symbolism in ATU150A

The fish symbolism present in mythologies mean different things to different regions. People have regarded the sea as the womb from which life emerges since ancient time. (Sax, 2013). To the Greco-Romans, fish held symbolic meaning of transformation and change, and it was sacred in their mythology. In the myth of Heros and Aphrodite, they need to escape from the ferocious Typhon and so they turned themselves into fish to save themselves. In Eastern Indian mythology, the fish symbolism is connected to creation as well as transformation. In discussing the historical significance of the fish, Jung (1959) writes that the goldfish of “Manu” is equated with Vishnu, who transforms himself in order to rescue Manu from a great flood (p.114). The substitution of a fish for a supernatural being is therefore established in more than one mythology. There is also the significance of the fish in Arthurian legends, and in Celtic mythology where the salmon of wisdom holds deep significance. The fish therefore, can be seen as a strong semiotic signifier across cultures, and most definitely so in the “Bawang Merah, Bawang Putih” variants. In Malay and indigenous Malaysian folklore, the significance of the fish can also be seen in “Batu Belah, Batu Bertangkup” where a mother, because she was not able to eat the treat of fish eggs that she’d been craving, decided to sacrifice herself to a carnivorous rockface. Here too, the fish (or its roe) becomes the catalyst for the tragic climax of the folktale. Similarly, in “Bawang Merah, Bawang Putih”, the fish that Merah speaks to and whom she believes to be her mother, is killed by her stepmother and served to her as a dish. Horrified and grieved, she buries the fishbones, which then grows into a tree, therefore in this tale, the fish and the tree are intimately connected and stands as a substitute for a maternal figure.

The tree is an element that can be found in the Occidental variants of ATU150a as well, as mentioned in the above section, but in the Malay variant there is a connection between the magical fish and the tree. This connection is an enigma but an account by Eric Mjöberg (1928) about his wanderings in the Malay Archipelago may provide some insight. In a chapter that is titled “The fish who follows the Path of Emancipation: A Fish That Walks on Land and Climbs Up Trees”, Mjöberg describes the “walking-fish” or *periophthalmus* in the mangrove swamps of the archipelago who “spends most of his life in water, but when occasion arises” will move to the land “and climbs trees as well” (1928, p.103). While something of an apocryphal account, what strikes the mind when reading this is the mythical imagery associated with this species of fish as the idea of “emancipation” and of moving between elements is certain symbolic. Again, this semiotic connection between the fish and the tree seems to be significant as in more occidental variants of ATU150A the connection is between the tree and the bird (or birds) which seems to be more logical in terms of proximity (the sky and the branches of the tree).

## 4. Discussion and Analysis

In this section, ecofeminism will be used to examine the metaphors and symbolism of the fish and the tree as present in both of the retellings, to explore the substitution of the feminine with nature symbols, in a sense lending significance to the erasure of the dead mother.

### 4.1 Femininity and Solidarity in “Bawang Putih, Bawang Merah” by Fazlyn Abdul Malek

In this retelling of the classic tale by Fazlyn Abdul Malek, “Bawang Putih Bawang Merah” starts off by letting the audience know that the half-sisters have a good relationship and are always helping each other with chores and errands. The ones who have a sour relationship are their mothers who are both married to the same man, thus making them co-wives. He only cares about the bride money that his daughters would fetch when they marry in the future. The co-wives, Mak Som and Che’ Chantek were always fighting each other over everything, which was a stark difference from the relationship of their daughters, the half-sisters, Putih and Merah who are very close to each other. Their mothers fought about everything, from “who should have the use of the river first to who would get the choicest pieces

of chicken for dinner.” They constantly made stories up about each other trying to win the affection of their husband.

This state of affairs violently ended when their father passed away, Merah’s mother was appointed as head of the household by the village chief, which, Puteh’s mother found unfair. They had a fight about it, and Puteh’s mother fell into the well leading to her demise (p.50). Soon after that, Puteh’s greedy stepmother agreed to marry her off without asking her permission to the village chief after being offered cows as the dowry. Merah was sent to call her sister who was spending time alone, where a prince saw her and wanted to make her his wife despite already having wives and concubines. When Merah arrived home, she saw that the prince was there, and her mother had tried to pass her off as Puteh. After paying the stepmother, Puteh was then taken to the palace by the prince. At the end of the story, Merah snuck out of the house refusing to be a replacement bride for the village chief and she rode away to the palace to save her sister and they disappeared into the night.

#### **4.2 Revisioning and Intertextual Nature Imagery : “Red and White” by Preeta Samarasan**

Preeta Samarasan’s version of the classic tale is told from the point of view of Red and the mind style is very different from Fazlyn Abdul Malek’s although in both tales the relationship between the half-sisters are not as inimical as portrayed in the traditional folktales. The narrative begins with Red relating how incompetent White truly is at everything. Red noticed that people will always try to paint one side as the good or protagonist and the other side as bad, or as the antagonist. White will always be seen as sweet and innocent, and her mother as the poor wronged woman. Red on the other hand, is always seen as dangerous and will make you suffer.

In this re-visioning, White lives with her stepsister, Red and Red’s mother after the passing of her mother and their father. After the death of her mother, White became delusional, believing the fish in the pond to be the reincarnation of her mother. When she ate the fish unknowingly, she became hysterical and gathered the bones before burying it in the ground. Once a plant sprouted from the spot, she believed that was her dead mother. However, once the plant grew bigger and bear inedible fruits, she abandoned the notion and start giving attention to boys instead. White would tell pitiful stories about herself, from her orphan status to her being bullied by her stepmother and Red.

One day, White split duties with Red, with the former being assigned to do the washing at the river and the latter having to go to the market to buy and sell groceries. After being out of the house all day, Red came home with no White in sight. White only came back home near dusk, much to the dismay and worry of the members of the household, with a small pumpkin in her basket. She told them that her stepmother’s shawl had floated down the river and she chased it only to end up at the entrance of a cave with an old woman inside. The pumpkin was a gift from the old woman for helping her. Red, sensing something amiss with the event, smashed the pumpkin and from it, tumbled jewellerys that were hot to the touch, confirming her suspicion that it was black magic. Red confronted the old woman and was given a pumpkin, this time filled with venomous snakes.

After that, Red noticed a swing had materialised on the White’s tree, with White looking smug like she has been keeping a secret. Soon after, a prince came looking for a woman whom he had heard singing whilst he was nearby. The woman turned out to be White and she followed the prince and moved away. Years after that, after the death of her mother, Red visited the palace and saw White looking pale with empty eyes and miserable.

“Red and White” is told from the point of view of Red, the more assertive and, the more aggressive sister. White, on the other hand, is described as being whimsical and always having her head in the clouds as well as a hopeless romantic. In the story, Red stated that not long after White’s mother passed, White convinced herself that she could converse with the fish in the pond. Red, tired of her sister’s delusional antics and wanting to curb it from getting even more out of hand, proceeded to cook the fish and serve the dish to her. Upon finding out, White became hysterical and simply inconsolable as she had truly believed that her dead mother had returned to her, her spirit reincarnated as a fish. White telling them that the fish was actually her mother can be read in the excerpt below:

Then she came out with some first-class grandmother's fiddlesticks about the fish being her dead mother. Collected all her bones, buried them – I mean my mother and I fell over laughing, though a part of me felt we should take her to a bomoh and get her seen to, poor thing. (p.60)

What is especially significant about this revisioning of “Bawang Merah, Bawang Putih” is that Samarasan modifies and combines various modes of symbolism, connecting the tale not just to the Occidental Cinderella by way of the pumpkin, but to the Grimm fairytale of Frau Holle or “Mother Holle” in which the negatively portrayed stepsister attempts to gain the kinds of gifts that Mother Holle awards her virtuous sister. In Samarasan's account, Red follows the wise woman to protect her hapless sister, White. Therefore, the nature imagery of the fish and the tree in this retelling is re-framed as being traps for the naïve.

### 4.3 The Connection between Tree and Fish Symbolism in Both Texts

In “Bawang Merah, Bawang Putih”, the tree mentioned is an old cengal tree, located in Hutan Mendalam. According to Merah, her sister, Putih would often time go there for some peace and quiet. Putera Inderapura, Prince of the Kingdom of Purbajaya first saw Putih here the day of her mother's death. The tree is accorded some mythical significance in the narrative, along with Hutan Mendalam which is said to have supernatural properties. It is hear that the prince heard Putih singing lullabies and fell in love and immediately giving out orders to his entourage to find her. Although in the text Merah only mentioned Putih going to the cengal tree once, it was a pivotal moment in Putih's life.

As I neared the compound of our house, I saw Mother busy entertaining the Prince and his warriors. I did not like her wide-eyed, hungry expression. “There she is! That's my daughter, Merah. She must have just returned from Hutan Mendalam. Were you at the cengal tree, Merah?” (p.53)

Although the symbol of the fish does not feature significantly in Malek's retelling, the fish does make a cameo at the end of the tale with the demise of Merah's mother. It was said that her body was found in the old well” and that her “face and buttocks looked like they had been eaten away by fish, or whatever sharp-toothed animal one might find in dark water” (p.37). By the language choice and connotation, it is implied that this rumoured fish is a stand-in for Putih's mother. Another clue that this is the implication lies in the fact that Merah's mother's buttocks were chewed, because she'd taunted Putih's mother of having a large “backside” (p.47). It is clear then that the fish retains its supernatural significance as a stand-in for a demised mother.

Similarly, in “Red and White”, White believes that the fish in the pond is a reincarnation image of her deceased mother. After accidentally eating the fish, she collected the bones and buried them carefully. Soon, a plant sprouted from the ground which made White believe that it is her mother, as narrated by the highly skeptical Red.

The moment she noticed some pathetic weed or other sprouting from her burial mound, she made a big fat deal of it. Don't know where she gets this type of ideas from. (p.60)

However, Red attests, once the sapling grew into an ugly looking tree with inedible fruits, she abandoned the whole idea of the tree being reincarnation of her mother and started giving attention to boys instead.

The shrub grew into an ugly, gnarled tree. But by then the arrival of boys on the scene had begun to distract my sister from pining for her mother. (p.61)

The tree then makes an appearance again after the pumpkin fiasco with the old woman who turned out to be a witch. This time, Red noticed that a swing had appeared on the tree as if it materialised out of thin air, but she knew that it was full of negative energy. White claimed that her mother's spirit pushed the swing for her when she sat on it and sang. When Red and her mother mocked White, she seemed unfazed and acted like she was keeping the best secret. Soon enough, a man came to the house with the



intention to propose marriage to White. Red believed that he had bad intentions and had been eyeing White for some time as can be seen from the following excerpt:

I'll never be able to prove it, but I think that self-proclaimed prince was the one who built that swing. He must have had an eye on my sister for a while, said to himself, there's an easy catch. The moment I laid my eyes on him I knew he was up to no good... (p.66)

In both "Bawang Merah, Bawang Putih" and "Red and White", the tree symbolises temporary comfort before being abandoned, albeit for different reasons. Putih from Bawang Merah, Bawang Putih abandoned her tree, the strong and sturdy cengal tree when the Prince invaded her privacy when she was singing by trying to approach her whereas White from "Red and White" abandoned her tree and the notion that the tree could be her mother coming back to her to focus her attention on the opposite sex, although this perspective is coloured by Red's cankered opinion of her sister.

## 5. Conclusion

This article presents the findings from analysing the texts for Tropes of Nature. Tropes of Nature can be found in every fairy tale and it is not restricted to just certain nature objects. The mythical fish symbolism seems to be more common in "Bawang Merah, Bawang Putih" than in the European variants. The tree symbolises a mother's love she had for her child when it appeared in Brothers Grimm's work whereas when it appeared in both version of the re-imagining of "Bawang Merah, Bawang Putih", it symbolises temporary comfort but also as a vehicle for social advancement, as it results in the heroine obtaining the hand of the prince in marriage. As mentioned in the above analysis, the significance of the connection between the tree and the fish is not one that should be overlooked as it connects two natural objects to motherhood, and may be the remnants of a belief in sympathetic and mimetic magic, which in turn has been distilled into a more abstract system of relations, through language.

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