

## Women and the Indonesian Folktales: Gender Perspective

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### Abstract :

*Folktales as traditional literature cannot be separated from the context of gender. In this regard, this research raises Indonesian folktales rooted in oral traditions in relation to gender. Currently, the idea of gender equality has become a very common topic of discussion for the past three decades, folktales which are recorded and circulated in electronic form in Indonesia need to be studied. This study was conducted on 5 (five) samples of folktales for elementary school students that have been published by the Agency for Language Development and Development, Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia. The research method used in this research is qualitative. The results showed that these stories still put forward women with images that must be beautiful, behave in a friendly and gentle manner, have noble character, are skilled in domestic work, are the target of many men, and ignore social competences such as understanding constitutional and security matters. In fact, with the changing times, folktales which can be a role model for future generations should also be important to accommodate these values without having to change the story line passed down from generation to generation. The main image of female characters tends to be focused on her physical beauty and her gentle; while male character images tend to focus on physical strength, wisdom, and ability to protect and lead.*

**Keywords:** folktales, gender, stereotype, education.

## **Introduction**

Folktale is traditional literature that is raised and passed down from generation to generation. Folktale, which is included in the area of folklore studies (Atkins, 2011), has a function as a projection (Dundes, 1965), a fantasy function, and a collective mediation function for the supporting communities (Ahmadi, 2012; 2016). Therefore, folktales cannot be separated from the philosophical, psychological, sociological, anthropological, and religious contexts of a particular society. In traditional community life, folktales survive well because the heirs pass on folktales to their children and grandchildren. Thus, folktales still 'live on' from time to time.

Folktales as part of traditional literature cannot be separated from the real world. Therefore, one of the themes contained in folktales relates to women, for example wise women (Barchers, 1990), archetype of women (Ahmadi, 2016), women as goddesses (Bolen, 2014). Women in folktales can appear as good images or in the form of bad images. Therefore, in folktales, for example, ancient Greek mythology, one can find the image of a woman as a good goddess, for example Athena and Artemis, but could also appear as an evil goddess, namely Hera. The emergence of the image of women in the folktales shows that it cannot be separated from the image of a collective society.

With regard to folktales, Indonesia as an agricultural country has many folktales from various regions. Indonesian folktales are very strong and is still dominant in remote areas because the people have strong oral traditions. Anonimously, folktales can be used as entertainment and a device to descent moral value in society such as gratitude, love for the environment, and character that must be possessed by children, teenage girls, and young people. Those are inherited through folktales. One of the contents found in folktales is about being the most respectable woman, namely the princess. folktale which tells about the life of a princess who is also supposed to be heir to the throne of the kingdom. The stories of the princesses in folktales are expected to become role models or references to the lives of girls so that many are told. expected behavior owned by the princess.

The intensity of the girls in grooming themselves and trying to be strong to be beautiful that can be found in everyday life may be influenced by the lifestyle that is exposed through these folktales. Likewise, the tendency of women to maximize their competence in the domestic sector and to be somewhat ignorant of broader competences is also due to exposure in folktales. People's perceptions and interpretations of gender relations that are still biased and unbalanced between femininity and masculinity can be sourced from folktales that biases gender that was enjoyed from childhood. The results of research on textbooks used in schools also show that there are still many gender biases (Zahro, 2020). The dominance of a patriarchal culture, including in the telling of folktales, can lead to the growth of awareness of

gender equality. As a result, the marginalization of women occurs in many sectors. This condition is exacerbated by the attitude of women themselves who view marginalization as normal, commonplace, and natural (Zahro, Witjoro, Sidyawati, 2020).

In connection with the principles of use and beauty, folktales can be a strategic tool in disseminating various values including the value of gender education. As a medium for cultivating values, literary works have a very broad reach. Literary works can be read by anyone, anytime, anywhere. Sasatra's work can be used as a medium of learning in schools, can be read in public places, and can also be present to enliven homes.

The values that are packaged in literary works are very enjoyable and beneficial reading materials. The beautiful, symbolic, and interpretative nature of literature enables the reader to learn lessons through a pleasurable enjoyment that penetrates deep in the soul in a subtle and unconscious way. One form of literary work is folktale. Like other literary works, folktale also offers its readers various benefits. These benefits by Saryono (1997) are divided into 4 types, namely experience, knowledge, awareness, and entertainment.

The study of gender in folktales is nothing new. The study of gender in folktales, for example, has been conducted by Rice (2000) who examined the problem of gender construction in relation to stereotypes, Fontaine (2004) who examined proverbs in relation to the context of discourse studies, and Ahmadi (2011, 2015) who examined inequality gender in folktales in Indonesia. The number of folktales from various regions that tell about princesses certainly has a big influence on the lives of teenage girls in real life. They certainly compete to observe, take lessons from stories, and imitate them in everyday life. The different realities between the lives of girls in the real world and the princesses in folktales are also feared to make girls lull in dreams of having a life like princesses. In this study, the image of the king's daughters in the digital version of Indonesian folktales would be analyzed. The study focuses on the image which is a form of physical, behavioral, social, mental, spiritual images that are expressed or depicted in the story.

In accordance with technological developments, the digital version of the story is really needed by children and teenagers who cannot be separated from technology. Especially during the learning period in the network which has begun to be developed a lot. Digital and electronic versions of folktales of the book are very easy to disseminate. The digital version of folktales should also accommodate the values needed by the digital generation. This is what makes this research important. In connection with the phenomenon of gender in folktales, this study describes gender narratives contained in Indonesian folktales. This research is very important to do because exploring gender in folktales will add to the treasury of gender studies, especially the context of folktales which is currently not widely published.

Gender studies are essentially related to societal social constructs of subjectivity and objectivity related to women and men (Evans & William, 2013; Ahmadi, 2014). Gender studies in various contexts, for example philosophy, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and religion, relate to themes of equality, inequality, or stereotypes. However, in its development, gender studies can also be included in the context of criminology (Knafla, 2002) which discusses the position of women and men in the context of crime, and gender in the environmental context (MacGregor, 2019) which discusses the existence of gender, especially women in relation to ecofeminism and ecofeminism in various environmental situations that exist in society.

### **Research Method**

This study uses a qualitative method that refers more to narrative (Merriam, 2018). With regard to data, this research, which is an area of literary study, refers to narrative events in a story that contain events that are described by words, phrases, sentences and involve characters and settings. The study focuses on the form of physical images, behavior, social, mental, and spiritual which are expressed through folktales in its relevance to the gender context.

The research data source is in the form of folktales for elementary school students which has been published by the Agency for Language Development and Development, Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia which can be accessed via the link <http://badanbahasa.kemdikbud.go.id/lamanbahasa/statik/2234>. There are five Indonesian folktales, including *Kisah Dewi Samboja* (folktale from West Java), *Putri Kumalasari* (folktale from North Kalimantan), *Joko Dolog* (folktale from East Java), *Putri Waeruwondo dan Sepatu yang Hilang* (folktale from Southeast Sulawesi), and *Di Balik Derita Si Boru Tombaga* (folktale from North Sumatra). The data analysis technique adapts the views of Miles & Huberman (2009), namely identification, classification, reduction. Researchers also conduct peer-debriefing so that the research results (Ahmadi, 2019) are more optimal.

### **Results and Discussion**

#### **Princesses must be Beautiful**

The main thing that the authors express in folktales is the beauty of the princess. Almost all folktales with the character of a princess always describe the physical beauty of the princess. The words "beautiful" and "pretty" are almost never separated from the writer's story. Likewise, the words "graceful", "charming" or "lovely" also always appear in the five stories analyzed. The beauty of the princess is not only widely described and mentioned, but also can be the subtitle of the story. In *Kisah Dewi Samboja*, for example, the first subtitle of the story

is "Beautiful Princess from Galuh Kingdom." *Joko Dolog's* story begins with a description of the beauty of the Surabaya Kadipaten girl with the subtitle "Beautiful Princess." In the story of *Putri Waeruwondo dan Sepatu yang Hilang*, it also begins with a story with the subtitle "Princess Waeruwondo" which tells a lot about the figure of a princess who has a beautiful appearance. Only the story about *Putri Kumalasari* does not begin with a description of the face of the princess, but begins with the subtitle "Princess Kumalasari is Sick". In the story *Di Balik Derita Si Boru Tombaga* (folktale from North Sumatra) there is also the title "A Woman's Stare" which describes the physical charm of the daughter of King Paniroi named Princess Donda (Boru's mother) who continues to overshadow Guasa, even though they only met when they were young. Guasa visited King Paniroi and did not speak.

The image of the princess's beauty starts from her beautiful face. In *Joko Dolog's* story, for example, it is described about the physical figure of the Surabaya Kadipaten Princess, Dewi Purbawati, starting from her beautiful face, her cheeks that always look red, her hair that looks like drooping, her eyes like starlight, her skin is yellow, and her slim body contains (Roesmiati, 2016: 2). In *Kisah Dewi Samboja*, the description of beauty is not only at the beginning of the story, but also in other parts. This is because the storyline is the story of Prince Anggalarang finding his princess to be his wife so that along the way Prince Anggalarang gets his princess the beauty of the princess is also described. One of the quotes is as follows.

Then came a very decisive day, Prince Anggalarang was sure of his choice of heart. Prince Anggalarang and Patih Sawung Galing would face Dewi Samboja. Patih Sawung Galing introduced himself and Prince Anggalarang. He said Prince Anggalarang's admiration for Dewi Samboja. He also said their goal was to meet Dewi Samboja. Dewi Samboja's kindness and beautiful face are the binding (Kurnia, 2016: 17).

The five stories are about the journey to find a mate so that the image of physical beauty is very strong in the story. The explicit description is accompanied by illustrations of beautiful women coloring the five stories. The physical descriptions that dominate folktales can be understood when linked to the spread of folktales that have been passed down from generation to generation orally. Descriptions that are based on physical things are easier to give concrete shadows. Moreover, folktales are generally enjoyed and told to children.

Folktales as a story that have been passed down from generation to generation is also close to traditional values. As stated by Stewig (in Nurgiyantoro, 2005) traditional literature is a form of oral speech that emerges and develops (from generation to generation) inadvertently to express various ideas that have appeared previously which are generally more intended as a means of providing moral messages. One of the traditional beauty messages as stated in various expressions that beautiful is clear skin, round eyes, long hair, a slim body, and so on.

The new beauty adaptation that began to develop since the 90's has not been much considered in writing folktales, including the digital version.

### **Princesses must be Friendly, Gentle, and Kind**

Most of the folktales tells the story of the princess's journey to get a mate. Likewise with the 5 folktales studied in this. *Kisah Dewi Sambojais* also about the meeting between Dewi Samboja and Prince Anggalarang, *Putri Waeruwondo dan Sepatu yang Hilangis* about Princess Waeruwondo and the young Laembo, *Joko Dolog* is the meeting between Dewi Purbawati and Joko Jumput, *Putri Kumalasari* also tells about princess who later married a young man named Ujang who found a cure for her. *Di Balik Derita Si Boru Tombagais* indeed about the absence of inheritance rights for girls, but at the beginning of the story is about the meeting of the daughter of King Paniroi named Princess Donda and the young Guasa who later had two daughters.

Those five girls in the stories are princesses with pleasant behavior and good character. The behavior of the princesses is a description of the behavior that the youth covet because it is a part of what princes and young men who want their daughter consider. Kindness and gentleness are described through the princess's interactions with her family, ladies-in-waiting, guests, and commoners.

Friendly, gentleness and kindness are mentioned explicitly accompanying the description of the beauty of the princess. This depiction is certainly very good for moral formation for teenage girls. However, the portion of this description is so large that the moral feminization in folktales feels very strong. One of the quotes about it is as follows.

"All right, Dewi Samboja. Uncle would ask you. Uncle was happy because Dewi would want and care about the situation of the Galuh people. They would lost it if Dewi did not come to greet the residents. Uncle never heard the talk of a Galuh people accidentally. He was happy when Dewi came. He also admired the beauty and kindness of Dewi. " Uncle Patih expressed his opinion. (Kurnia, 2016: 8-9)

Women are constructed to always do good regardless of the underlying conditions. She is only taught to always do good and will get good. Women are convinced that life is a reciprocal relationship. Because of her good attitude, everyone who loves the princess will definitely be protected. Here's one quote about it.

As a royal princess, Waeruwondo was tempered by the good behavior of her parents. Every word spoken and behavior that is shown and conveyed must be polite so that the people around him feel comfortable. Having no siblings, he considered everyone in the palace to be his brothers. He treats everyone well and doesn't even hesitate to help other people's

difficulties. Because of his good attitude, the whole palace loved Waeruwondo like his own children or siblings (Uniawati, 2016: 16)

### **Princess must be Skilled in Domestic Work**

The story of the princesses is not far from the royal garden and family room. This setting is the dominant setting behind events involving princesses. When the princess arrives with a guest, when the princess pampers her father, the princess is joking with the palace maid, or just taking a walk enjoying the beauty of the flowers. Here's an excerpt.

Besides being fond of providing help to people in distress, Waeruwondo also had other hobbies. He had a passion for planting and caring for flowers. He planted various flowers around the palace. There are roses, orchids, lilies, ashokas, and sunflowers which when blooming would show a very beautiful color. Thanks to his skill and patience in caring for plants, the palace looked beautiful and soothed the eyes of anyone who looked at it. Every morning and evening Waeruwondo spent his time in the garden, caring for flowers, watering them with water, giving them fertilizer to make them fertile, and weeding out the grass that grew wild around the flower plants (Uniawati, 2016: 10).

The ability to do domestic work is always the main thing in the story. Princess is always skilled at arranging like Dewi Samboja. Diligently caring for flowers in the garden like Princess Waeruwondo. Serving or caring for family needs like Dewi Purbawati. Flexible serving drinks or dishes like Princess Donda.

The domestic setting is getting stronger because one of the conflicts in the story is the determination of a mate for the princess. Family deliberations that take place in the family room, clarify the intention of the princess's heart, or the princess jokes with the ladies in the garden. In fact, the story about the princess is actually the toughness of the princess in facing various problems. Dewi Samboja in *Kisah Dewi Smaboja* is Dewi Samboja's hard effort to survive after being removed from the palace because the Bajo or robbers who paralyzed her kingdom, Princess Kumalasari was able to endure pain for a long time until a drug called reeds of miss was found by Ujang, the son of King Guasa who fought culture which ignores the inheritance rights of the family due to the absence of sons, Dewi Purbawati who firmly rejects Jaka Taruna's cheating, and Princess Waeruwondo, who is good at strategy, do not appear to be prominent in the story.

### **The Princess Becomes Object of the Struggle**

The meeting between the princess and her soul mate in most folktales is because the prince or the young man won the competition. Dewi Purbawati and Jaka Jumput who defeated Jaka Taruna and Prince Situbanda who tried to fulfill the requirements of the princess to be able to propose her. Princess Waeruwondo was also found by the Laembo through "finding the

princess's missing shoe". Princess Kumalasari was also married off to Ujang as well because it was the young man who was able to find a medicine to treat her. Dewi Samboja and Princess Donda are not because of the competition, but their charm of beauty makes the youths captivated.

This picture shows the price of a woman in a traditional culture influenced by a patriarchal culture. Their bargaining power is determined by the number of men who yearn for them. The depiction of figures in folktale like this certainly reinforces the patriarchal reality that exists in society. Girls must be beautiful, gentle, white, and have long black hair. In terms of competence, women are not required to have intelligence, but are constructed as passive figures. This means that gender values in folktales are largely not fair values. This reinforces Soedjiono's (2006) research which concludes that none of the female characters in folktales is worthy of being role models. This study confirms that the alleged depiction of men and women in folktales has been influenced by the myth of patriarchy living in society is true. Women in folktales are beautiful, gentle, helpless, and become contested.

#### **Princess do not really study society and state administration**

The princesses in folktales are the daughters of the king who are also heirs to the throne. However, the stories do not highlight their abilities as potential leaders. They are constructed as princesses who then get a capable partner as a king and the princess becomes a companion. Dewi Purbawati, who received a powerful and virtuous Jaka Jumput, who was able to get rid of Jaka Taruna who was cheating and Prince Situbanda who was unscrupulous. Dewi Semboja got Prince Anggalarang, the strong Laembo for Princess Waeruwondo, the wise young Guasa for Princess Donda, and the good Ujang for Princess Kumalasari.

In *Di Balik Derita Si Boru Tombaga*, about the absence of inheritance rights for girls who are trying to fight against the daughters of Princess Donda and King Guasa. The stories of the daughters should be able to inspire girls to empower themselves more from various aspects. A leader must have various skills that are actually owned by them. This is shown by their existence as the leader of the kingdom. Dewi Smaboja can exist on the run and even reclaim her kingdom. This is certainly very extraordinary and can arouse the enthusiasm of young people, especially women, not only to focus on beautifying themselves.

Likewise, Princess Donda's daughters were against culture, which deprived a family of inheritance because they did not have sons. This is an extraordinary struggle that deserves a larger portion of *Di Balik Derita Si Boru Tombaga*. Emphasis on the struggle of the children of Princess Donda and King Guasa who were deprived of inheritance because they were women would inspire women that they have the same rights. Their voices must be heard and their human rights must not be violated.



The success of the children of King Guasa and Princess Donda in fighting for their rights, the ingenuity of Dewi Purbawati, the resilience of Dewi Samboja, the intelligence of Princess Waeruwondo can be explored more broadly, proportionally, because all of that is certainly obtained through a learning process. Folktales that emphasize the achievement of such competences are very much needed in today's times when gender bias is very strong.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the results of the presentation, Indonesian folktales show that the existence of gender is very strong, namely putting forward women with images that must be beautiful, behave kindly and gently, have noble character, are skilled at doing domestic work, are the target of many men, and ignore social competences such as understanding constitutional and security. Thus, folktales can be used as a reference and support in relation to gender learning. The hope is that school students will not only learn gender from a formal context in school, but also learn gender through folktales.

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