

# Masculine Domination: Gender Construction in Indonesian Folk Literature

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**Abstract.** In the early stages of childhood, children are often faced with cultural values where they begin to grow and recognize the various value systems that apply in society. In the context of Indonesian society, folk literature is an initial transmission medium of knowledge that parents often use for their children. Therefore, the contents of the material from children's books greatly contribute to the acquisition of children's knowledge and experience from various situations, events, or places in their lives. This paper discusses the construction of gender contained in Indonesian folklore. The research was conducted on popular story that is constantly reproduced and consumed repeatedly, both in the form of books and subject matter at school. Based on research obtained from the results of research, the value order to be ideal men and women in gathering collectively Indonesian society settles in various characters in story. To support the construction, a number of ideal figure of men and women were built through story characters, threats to deviant construction, and male superiority myths. Folk stories as a medium of early transmission became a medium of transmission towards the institutionalization of intergenerational patriarchal construction in Indonesia from an early age.

**Keywords:** *folk literature, gender construction, masculinity, femininity, gender studies*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of 2018, The Guardian published a news with a quite horrendous title, namely "Must monsters always be male? Huge gender revealed in children's books ". In his report, it was mentioned that in the 100 most popular children's picture books in 2017, the characters in the story were dominated by male characters with masculine roles, while female characters were lost from one-fifth of the books based on top ranking [1]. The best-selling children's books this year, such as The Gruffalo, Guess How Much I Love You, and Dear Zoo show that all animals referred to use male pronouns. The existing character is dominated by male figures with men narrative perspective. In fact, the proportion of the number of male and female characters in the story also experienced inequality. The number of male figures is more than women. This condition seems to confirm that the ideal form of cultural construction in a

society and the underlying power relations can be revealed through the cultural products [2]–[4], including children's literature.

Through this news, it can be seen that the issue of gender equality, which feminists have proposed since the 1960s [5], continues to occur today. If seen in a more specific context, it can be seen that various problems of patriarchal construction are not actually built through a number of cultural mechanisms in adult human life, but have been nurtured to the children from early age. This is because children's reading material, or children's literature, has an important role in the development of children's knowledge from the beginning. Functional children's literature is important for imprinting social values to the children. Therefore, the contents of the material from children's books greatly contribute to the acquisition of children's knowledge and experience from various situations, events, or places in their lives [6], [7].

In the context of Indonesian society, folklore is an initial transmission medium of knowledge that parents often use for their children. Usually parents tell folk tales, both verbally and through writing, to their children at night before their children sleep or spend time with children in their spare time. The role of folklore in the process of child development is very important. In the process of this initial knowledge transmission, folklore became important because folklore was not only understood as an enchanting story or a bedtime story that served as an entertainment medium. However, folklore is an autobiographical ethnography ... it is a people's own description of themselves [8]. In other words, by understanding people's folklore, an understanding of the values, ideas, and worldviews of the community will be obtained in seeing and responding to the surrounding reality [9]–[11].

As a transmission medium of knowledge and values of a society, the role of folklore occupies a central position. This is because in the early stages of childhood, children are often faced with cultural values where they begin to grow and recognize the various value systems that apply in society. These various values, approved or not, will be an accumulation of knowledge of the model they use, apart from imitating members of their family, in their later lives. During this process, literary works consumed by children will form many variables in understanding, including gender problems [12], [13]. Therefore, the importance of a form of child learning should be free from the stereotyping set by a community, including gender roles. In other words, children should not get bias knowledge and not adjust to the community with stereotypical standard. The stories must be assessed based on the topic, form, and content because they are related to the acquisition of knowledge which will later be accepted by children. This is also important because perceptions at the level of development of early stage children are not suitable for understanding the issues of gender ideology that are socially and culturally imposed on them.

This research examines gender issues, mainly related to the construction of gender contained in Indonesian folklore. In this folklore there are many images and gender relations. This relationship can be seen from the characterization of the characters and the interpersonal attitudes caused by their gender identity. The work of fiction as a result of construction, in this case the collective creation of society, needs to be analyzed from the inner structure of the various modes of ideology hiding behind the outside structure of the story. This not only serves to find out the ideology hidden in it, but also can provide new spaces of awareness of the literary phenomena that are in the stories consumed by children.

Therefore, this research is important because of the following reasons. First, children's literature research in Indonesia is still very rare. In fact, it can be said that children's literature research in Indonesia is characterized by the lack of scientific publications on children's literature and the lack of literary scientists in the world of child literature [14]. Second, gender is a socio-cultural construction of society, not determined by divine power. Therefore, understanding to the basic level is needed to be able to provide an understanding of the

importance of gender equality from an early age, namely through stories consumed by children. Third, there are several studies on child literature conducted by Indonesian researchers. The research, which focuses on the problems of gender representation in mass media [15], [16], cultural products [17], adult literary work [18], [19]. In addition there are also two studies by Sari, Moecharam, Hermawan, & Risky [20] and Soelistyarini [14] who examine the genre of children's literature. However, the first focuses more on the research focus on the reproduction of gender-marketed children's storybooks and the latter focuses on the issue of gender representation in works written by children in the KKKP book series published by Dar! Mizan.

## 2. METHOD

This study uses qualitative design because it intends to understand the phenomenon of gender construction contained in Indonesian folklore. To do that, a liberal feminism approach is used which assumes that there is a need for a struggle for the liberation of women throughout the world to get equality with men in various sectors of life [21]. In this study a sample of 25 Indonesian folklore was titled *Murtado Macan Kemayoran, Si Pitung, Asni and Mirah, Untung Suropati, Angkuh Javanese Angkri Jagoan, Ki Rangga Gading, Sangkuriang, Lutung Kasarung, Putri Kandita, Karang Nini Legend and Bale Kambang, Jaka Tarub, Timun Emas, Jaka Kendhil, Dewi Sri, Rara Mendhut, Gajah Wong River, Roro Jonggrang, Origin of Mount Merapi, Shallot and Garlic, Ki Ageng Mangir Wanabaya, Calon Arang, Keong Emas, Ande Ande Lumut, Jakar Seger and Rara Anteng, and Damarwulan and Minajingga*. The selected folklores are popular story in Indonesia. The story is always reproduced in the form of a fairy tale book or used in learning materials at school. That is, the stories are always reproduced and consumed. The folklore comes from the oral literature of the community and has been documented by the Malay Culture Study and Development Center. The story is stored in the page repository and can be accessed free of charge by the entire community through the [www.ceritakyatnusanantara.com](http://www.ceritakyatnusanantara.com) page. Since January 20, 2009, this page has been visited by more than 27,117,098 people worldwide.

Data collection techniques used in this study are close reading and codification. First, the close reading technique is done by repeatedly reading each research data source to examine each detail of the event that occurred, determine the data used according to the research objectives, and record the data used on the data card. Second, the codification is done by copying the data that has been determined and copied into the data analysis instrument, later to be encoded according to the category. Finally, a re-examination of the data collection process can be carried out. Data analysis techniques used, namely 1) display, 2) reduction, and 3) conclusion. First, the display is done by processing and preparing previously collected data to be classified and arranged according to each category. Second, data reduction is done by re-screening research data according to research needs. Every data obtained is reclassified and coded according to its category. Third, drawing conclusions by interpreting data in accordance with the theory used.

## 3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In general, from the folktales studied, it is clearly seen that there is an imbalance in the number of figures based on their gender. Almost the whole story is always dominated by male figures (ratio 5: 3). Female characters can be found in just a few folktales. Even if there is a female figure, the figure occupies a subordinate figure. Except for the stories that become women as the main characters, such as the story titled Putri Kandita, Timun Emas, Dewi Sri, Rara Mendhut, Rara Jonggrang, Bawang Merah Bawang Putih.

In addition to inequality in the presence proportion of the figures based on sex, there are also various forms of gender construction in the roles of men and women. Various forms of construction show a form of male domination in various spheres of life towards women. Although explicitly there is no form of violence or oppression between sexes, but the description of how to be a man and woman in the collective imagination of Indonesian society is clearly illustrated

### **3.1 Becoming Men and Women in Indonesia**

Based on 25 folktales studied, they represent the ideal form to be Indonesian men and women. In constructing the gender role, there is a form of inequality in the form of physical and role dichotomy. In the construction of the collective imagination of the Indonesian people, men occupy a central position in various spheres of life. All male protagonists in folklore are always portrayed as muscular, handsome, helpful, knowledgeable, thoughtful, wise, brave, and loyal. Even if there are several male antagonists in the story, the difference in physical construction with the protagonist lies in its appearance, character, and behavior. Various symbols of masculinity attached to male figures are retained.

Unlike the male figure, the construction of the Indonesian people's collective imagination of the ideal female figure is manifested in the form of a female protagonist with a beautiful, physically weak, kind, relentless, and loyal figure. Likewise in the construction of female antagonist figures. The main characteristics that must be possessed by women are not lost. They will still be described as weak human beings with bad temperament and behavior. Many forms of female symbolic figures represent bad women, such as Bawang Merah, Stepmother, Kleting Abang, Kleting Ijo, and Kleting Biru.

These various depictions show the ideal gender construction in the collective imagination of Indonesia. Various values are attached to how men and women should be institutionalized in the form of folklore and then transmitted between generations [22]. Various depictions that exist are perceived as a general truth that deserves to be imitated and inherited. In fact, parents will use symbolic figures in folklore to give lessons to their children. Their children will be taught to imitate the characters of imaginative characters that exist as an ideal reference for future growth and development. This is like the figure of Panji Asmarabangun in the story of Andhe-Andhe Lumut or Inu Kertapati in the story of Keong Emas often being a symbolic figure of the ideal image of a man [23]. The figure not only has a handsome face, but also has a muscular body, broad-minded, martial arts expert, respect for parents, and able to protect their partners.

Likewise for his daughter, symbolic figures such as Bawang Putih, Candra Kirana, Sekartaji, Dwi Sri, Timun Mas are considered as representations of ideal women. These figures are not only portrayed physically perfect, but the behavior of those who like to succumb, be patient in the face of calamities, believe in their partners, loyal, and gentle in their lives are manifestations of ideal women.

Various constructions on masculinity are attached to male figures and the femininity values are attached to female characters. The values are distributed by the division of roles towards the domain of their working area. Every man in the story is always described as a breadwinner or a traveler. They are free to go wander to new territories. This picture contrasts with the limitations of the settings contained in the story of female figures. Almost all female figures always occupy the position of story settings in the domestic area, such as home or kingdom. There are not many settings in the public domain that are used when female figures are displayed in the story. Even if there is the use of female figures who are portrayed as a traveler, as in the figure of Candra Kirana and Sekartaji, the wandering they do is a manifestation of the loyalty of a woman to find

her partner. It is a picture that is the same as the reality of life. men always dominate in various sectors of human life in almost all the world [24], [25].

This picture shows the collective imagination of the Indonesian people in seeing the ideal figure in being a man and woman. To be able to become a complete male figure, there are values that must be followed so that a person can be called an Indonesian male. This also applies to women. In this construction there is clearly a form of depiction that shows the superiority of men who dominate women in various ways. Women are always imaged as a form of creature that is completely different and contrary to the figure of a man.

### **3.2 Labeling of Deviant Construction**

In folklore there is also a construction in the form of labeling carried out on men and women that is not in accordance with the conventions that have been created. Figures like Wedhawati in the story of Calon Arang and Nyai Intan in the story of Andhe-Andhe Lumut are a form of "threat" to women who deny the construction that has been set. Wedhawati is a female witch who has a bad character. He has the power to be able to transform human beings into animals. It was said that he had transformed the form of Candar Kirana's daughter into a golden snail. In addition, in another story the figure of Nyai Intan as a wealthy widow who has a bad character. He just likes to others. The interesting thing about the two constructs of the story is that female figures have always been an example of human bad behavior and the consequences are coming. Wedhawati and Nyai Intan are two forms of women who are considered "wrong" in the construction of Indonesian society.

Various narratives built in the story always focus women as objects. Various women's behavior that is not in accordance with the construction that has been built always gets a "threat". It is like a stubborn woman will be unlucky like what happened to Rara Jonggrang, Dewi Sri, Rara Mendhut. The three figures are told to end their lives because they reject male proposals or even get a curse because of their beauty.

Descriptions of a bad woman are very bias compared to the depiction of bad Indonesian men. Among all the folklore that exists, the ugliness that is pinned on the male sex character is only to do evil. In addition to this there are no other portrayals like on female characters. No man becomes a witch or a widower man who likes to do evil to others. Even the only portrayal of men as evil beings as "buto" in the story of Timun Emas. Even in this construction a male figure is forgiven because in Javanese culture, buto is not a human being at all, but a supernatural being.

From the various constructs, it can be seen that the gender construction in the story clearly illustrates the existence of a form of "threat" by labeling and warnings to the community that do not follow the gender construction set by the community. This form of depiction will be very contradictory to the forms of literary discourse that exist in the contemporary Indonesian era at this time [2]. In today's contemporary stories, the narratives built into the story actually show many forms of discourse resistance to the dominance of existing masculinity. However, these stories are not for children, but for adults [26].

### **3.3 Myth: Men are Always Superior to Women**

To institutionalize various patriarchal values through folktales, there are a number of myths that are always maintained as general truth. In each story there are always scenes of female characters who will experience misfortune and then be helped by male figures. This form of construction is always presented in all folklore. This kind of thing is a characteristic of the plot development model in Indonesian folklore. However, these events can not only be interpreted as a natural thing. The event of the helplessness of women who have to wait for the help of men

to help her become a narrative that is always repeated from various stories. There is absolutely no story construction that shows a woman who does not experience misfortune or experience misfortune and is able to handle it herself without the help of men. In the story of Asni and Mirah, Mirah as a female character is clearly described as a "gift" for the fight between men. Even in the story of Sangkuriang, the figure of a female pig named Wayungyang immediately became pregnant because she accidentally drank male semen.

These various figures are forms of strengthening the superiority of men to women. The value development is carried out by building inferiority images of women through characters in folklore. These various things are considered as a fair value system for the people of Indonesia. As proof, these stories are constantly reproduced and consumed repeatedly by Indonesian people.

Until now, the forms of male superiors in various spheres of life in Indonesia are still widely seen [27], [28]. These forms of superiority are always perceived as natural. This happens because since childhood Indonesian children have received transmissions of stories that are gender biased.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Various values for being ideal men and women in the collective imagination of Indonesian society settle in various characters in folklore. To support this construction, various forms of labelling of deviant construction are pinned to support the legitimacy of the truth and dominance of male superiority. Through these findings it can be understood why there are various forms of gender injustice that have occurred in Indonesia. Folk stories as a medium of transmission of initial knowledge to children become institutionalized for continuing patriarchal construction in Indonesia.

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