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Image of Woman in Indonesian Folktales: Selected Stories from the Eastern Indonesian Region

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Abstract

In Indonesia, a folk tale is used as a medium of entertainment as well as a teaching tool for children. Parents read folktales to their children at night. Folktales are used in the text of Indonesian lessons at the elementary education level. However, Indonesian folktale is suspected of being gender-biased. Although there is research on this subject, there is still little research on Indonesian folktales originating from Eastern Indonesia. Previous research conducted is still focused on the western region of Indonesia, for example, Java and Sumatra Island. This study aims to understand how women are depicted in Eastern Indonesian folktales, especially to understand the objectification of female characters. Based on the results of our research, we argue that many female characters in Eastern Indonesian folktales are subject to objectification. The objectification of female figures is carried out in the form of women as objects of sexuality, women as a medium of exchange of power, and women being passive and working in the domestic sphere. This finding shows that the folktale of Eastern Indonesia cannot be separated from patriarchal ideology. These stories show that women in the imagination of the Indonesian people still occupy an inferior position compared to men. Furthermore, the female characters also experience objectification and inequality as in folktales from Western Indonesia. The patriarchal point of view in folktales has deep roots and spreads in Indonesia. Research proves that the ideology of folktale is not always in harmony with the ideal values?? that exist in society. It takes a critical attitude towards the selection of stories that will be conveyed to children

Keywords: Image of Woman, Objectification, Indonesian Folktales, Eastern Indonesian Region

Introduction

According to the Central Statistics Agency of Indonesia (2015), 1331 ethnic groups inhabit the territory of Indonesia, an archipelagic country consisting of various cultures. The cultural heritage of Indonesia is enriched with artifacts produced by these diverse ethnic groups as hinted by the presence of 366 documented folktales in the nation. (Baihaqi et al., 2015) But, in comparison with a large number of ethnic groups, the number of documented folktales is very little. The existence of folktale in a community occupies an important position. A folktale is an ethnographic description of the community that owns the story (Dundes, 1969) because it contains its values

and worldview (Andalas, 2018; Aristama et al., 2020; Sulistyorini & Andalas, 2017). For generations, the folktales have been passed down as “cultural treasures” that contain the cultural essence or cultural DNA (Bar Zaken, 2020) of a particular community. In other words, understanding the folktale of a community will gain knowledge and views of the community’s life (Andalas, 2015; Dundes, 1969). These various cultural treasures are passed down between generations and perceived as shared cultural truths.

In Indonesia, a folktale is used as a medium of entertainment as well as a material for teaching to children. Parents’ reading folktales to their children at night and their usage in the text of Indonesian lessons at the elementary education level shows the importance of folktales to the people of Indonesia. However, in reality, various folktales, that are constantly reproduced and consumed in reading books or learning materials in schools, are suspected of being gender biased (Eliyanah & Zahro, 2021). Andalas & Qur’ani (2019) argue that Indonesian folktales have an imbalance in the proportion of characters and a particular stigma is attached to the male or female gender.

Various folktales found throughout the world also contain gender bias as exemplified in Persian folktales where male and female characters are depicted as different-sex objects while men are portrayed as independent, rational, strong, and accomplished characters and women as the opposite (Hosseinpour & Afghari, 2016); the folktales of Sri Lanka which reflect male dominance in the stories (Medawattegedera, 2015). However, there are also examples of exceptional folktales where the women are not subordinated or subjugated rather heightened as the African folktales which reject or subvert women’s patriarchal control, manipulation, exclusion, and oppression (Florence, 2016; Sheik, 2018); or folktales found in Saudi Arabia present brave and intelligent women (Al-Khalaf, 2019).

The outcomes of previous research intensify the belief that folktale as a form of cultural heritage must be assessed concerning its topic, form, and content as it is related to the children’s acquisition of knowledge. Understanding these parts of folktales is crucial as the pragmatic development at the level of early childhood is not adequate to comprehend the problem of gender bias that is socially and culturally imposed on them.

Studies on gender issues in folktales found in several regions of Indonesia, as in Java (Ariani, 2016; Hapsarani, 2017; Iswara, 2019; Juansah et al., 2021; Rochman, 2015; Sari, 2015; Setiawan et al., 2016; Wulansari, 2020), folktales from Sunda (Fauzar, 2019), folktales from North Sumatra (Baiduri, 2015; Paramita, 2020; Syahrul, 2020), and folktales from Southeast Sulawesi (Putra, 2018) among others, have been carried out. Instead of the research works of a large quantity done on the folktales originating in the Western parts of Indonesia like Java and Sumatra Island, the folktales of Eastern Indonesia have not been observed from scholarly perspectives. So, it has an utmost necessary to do research works on those unsung tales. So, this study aims to throw light on the folktales originating in Eastern Indonesia. This research aims to understand how women are depicted and also objectified in Eastern Indonesian folktales. It is expected that the results of this study can complement the results of previous studies. Understanding this issue will help us reassess the story based on the topic, form, and content because it is related to the acquisition of knowledge that children will receive. This is also important because perceptions at the early stage

of children's growth and development are not suitable for understanding the problems of socially and culturally imposed gender ideology.

Gender Representation in Folktale

Representation is the practice of constructing meaning through signs and language (du Gay et al., 1999; Hall, 2003). From this perspective, language is not understood as a stable thing and will always be tied to the context in which it attends. In everyday life, human beings use language to translate and construct various meanings about various things around them. Various objects that exist around human life are understood as neutral things. However, through human beings' marking, the meaning of an object is attached by constructing several representations. The meaning attached to an object is not standard but fluid, and can always change according to the context of human development in interpreting things.

Hall (2003) views language as a representational system because, through language, human beings can maintain the dialogue that occurs and allow them to build a culture of shared understanding and interpret the world around them in the same way. Language is a medium that can represent thoughts, ideas, and feelings in a culture. Therefore, representation through language is essential for creating meaning because culture is a battleground for meaning. Through culture, various meanings about things are created and legitimized as a common truth.

As the author's ideological space, folktale provides dozens of spaces for interpretation and hypnotizes his readers to unconsciously participate in the ideological flow contained in literary works (Sugiarti & Andalas, 2018). This is because the process of reproducing literary works is not isolated from the cultural, political, and social context of a society and, in turn, will shape the worldview of writers, readers, and the audience (Arimbi, 2009). In the context of this research, a folktale becomes a space for the representation of gender construction from the perspective of Indonesian society. The various divisions of roles inherent in each character, regarding how to be a man and a woman, are a form of representation of the ideology of gender in Indonesian society. These various ideologies are embodied in literary fiction spaces that the readers will receive.

Through the representational system built-in folktale, the identity to be a woman or a man is built. Identity, in the study of feminism, is not understood as a singular thing. Identity is the result of the construction of individuals or groups in the self-labeling process. Gender, from the point of view of feminism, is seen as the result of socio-cultural construction prevailing in a society. Therefore, the gender identity attached to the roles that men and women must carry out in human life is the result of human construction and is not innate. Therefore, gender identity is a political matter. The identity construction process does not occur in a single or causal process at the subject's will but is a temporal process that operates through the repetition of norms (Butler, 1993).

In this identity politics, feminism is positioned to attack the traditional identities attached to women based on traditional norms built from the point of view of men's minds. Women are invited to build awareness of their identity by understanding it as a flexible thing (plural) and not like what men have attached to it (Lara, 1998).

Apart from this, space and time also significantly influence the process of identity formation. Different moments will create different identity narratives, and different environments build

different historical perspectives (Arimbi, 2009). In this context, it is crucial to understand the form of gender identity built in the narrative of Indonesian folktales.

Female Objectification

The existence of folktale as a cultural product of society cannot be perceived as a value-free cultural product. Folktale as a cultural product is ideological. A folktale is constructed based on a particular point of view. Within this framework of thought, feminist criticism aims to weaken oppression against women from economic, political, social, and psychological perspectives.

The perpetuation of operations against women on cultural products, such as folktales, is carried out by using the male point of view in seeing the reality of life. This point of view then seems to be seen as neutral and inclusive even though it is not neutral and inclusive because it tends to objectify women (Hapsarani, 2017).

Objectification theory argues that women experience sexual objectification when they are treated as body parts or a collection of body parts judged on their benefit to others (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Sexual objectification is a form of dehumanization because women are seen as objects or commodities (Nussbaum, 1995). Women are treated as objects which do not have complete power over their destiny and can be bought or sold without considering their experiences and feelings. This shows that sexuality and sexual relations are born by asymmetric power structures.

Seven conditions indicate the occurrence of objectification in a person: 1) if someone is treated as a tool to fulfill goals, 2) if someone is treated as a person who cannot determine his wishes, 3) if someone is treated as a person who has no agency, 4) if someone is treated as if they could be exchanged with other objects, 5) if someone is treated as an object that can be hurt, 6) if someone is treated as something that can be owned, and 7) if a person's feelings and experiences are considered unimportant (Nussbaum, 1995). These indicate the occurrence of objectification in building subject-object relationships.

Based on the opinion above, it appears that the various descriptions in Indonesian folktales need to be evaluated in the framework of gender studies. Various representations of the objectification of women in stories are indeed very dangerous, especially when children consume folktales. Sexual objectification is the beginning of the emergence of sexual violence, which has significant consequences on one's understanding and perspective on sexual violence (Loughnan et al., 2013). When a person sexually objectifies another person, he will perceive that that party is lower than himself. The perception of women as objects of men, especially in terms of sexuality, is very dangerous for children's understanding of gender. Women are only seen as objects or commodities.

Impact of Gender Biased Reading Materials on Children

In contrast to sex, gender is a trait that is attached to human beings based on their socio-cultural roles in society. Throughout the history of the development of human life, there have been situations of injustice in the position and roles of women in various spheres of human life. Women tend to be positioned as inferiors who must submit to the superiority of men who dominate human life (Bourdieu, 2001).

As a fundamental dimension in understanding social life individually, gender becomes a tool for self-awareness in responding to and understanding various phenomena around them. In addition, gender awareness also influences how human interactions may be held as a worldview from birth to death (Taylor, 2003). Therefore, a person is never born with a particular gender but with the freedom to determine the roles and positions they want in their lives.

Childhood is a crucial period that will affect the way of life until adulthood. This stage is the initial stage for children to learn to understand various realities and respond to them. Through reading materials or fairy tales that they consume every day, children will get information on attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors that they will emulate and apply in their lives. In this position, it is crucial to be aware of the stereotypes that are widely practiced by patriarchal cultures regarding how men and women should play their roles in life. If children are presented with gender-biased stories from an early age, this will affect how children perceive various things in their future lives.

Various forms of ideology and teachings, both explicit and implicit, exist in literary works created from a patriarchal point of view and continue to be studied and shared in each generation. As a result of this kind of consumption, children will perceive various things in the story as a truth stored in their subconscious, and unconsciously will become their guide in interacting and behaving with their environment in the future. If this continues, children from an early age will begin to perceive biased gender roles in memory even though they cannot discriminate between men and women sexually (Bussey & Banddura, 1992). This is despite the view that, in reality, children feel that they have to identify themselves sexually, as male or female. If this is allowed to continue, there will be efforts to perpetuate patriarchal culture to limit the various roles of women from an early age and limit children's social processes in the later years of development (McDonald, 2010).

Method

This study uses a qualitative method and the feminist literary criticism approach. Sources of research data are Indonesian folktales originating from Eastern Indonesia, namely 1) "The Legend of Ile Mauraja from East Nusa Tenggara", 2) "The Origin of Lake Limboto from Gorontalo", 3) "The Origin of Botu Liodu Lei Lahilote from Gorontalo", 4) "La Upe from South Sulawesi", 5) "Sawerigading from South Sulawesi", 6) "La Onto-Ontolu from Southeast Sulawesi", 7) "Indara Pitaraa and Siraapare from Southeast Sulawesi", 8) "The Legend of the Horn of Nature from Central Sulawesi", 9) "Napombalu from North Sulawesi", 10) "Alamona n 'Tautama n'Taloda (First Man in the Talaud Islands) from North Sulawesi", and 11) "Four Sultans in North Maluku from Maluku". The eleven stories have been accessed from the documentation done by www.ceritakayatnusantara.com. This website is one of the complete databases for the preservation of folktales. The stories on the website are managed by the Center for the Study and Development of Malay Culture, Yogyakarta, Indonesia. The selected eleven stories fulfill the following criteria: 1) The stories come from the eastern part of Indonesia; 2) there are female characters in the story; 3) there is a depiction of the role of female characters in it. The eleven stories are analyzed using content analysis techniques with a feminist perspective to criticize how women are depicted in folktales in Eastern Indonesia.

Results and Discussion

This study aims to describe the representation of female characters in Eastern Indonesian folktales, especially the objectification of female characters. The data shows three forms of the objectification of female figures: women as objects of male sexuality, women as a medium of exchange of power, and women who are passive and work in the domestic area.

Women as Objects of Male Sexuality

Objectification theory argues that women experience sexual objectification when they are treated as body parts or a collection of body parts judged on their benefit to others (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Sexual objectification is a form of dehumanization because women are seen as objects, or commodities (Nussbaum, 1995). Women are treated as objects which do not have complete power over their destiny and that can be bought or sold without considering their experiences and feelings. This shows that sexuality and sexual relations are born by asymmetric power structures.

In Eastern Indonesian folktale, it is found that the story is not neutral, and it tends to be inclusive because the depiction in the story tends to objectify women. In the eleven stories analyzed, this depiction was found in eight stories, namely "The Legend of Ile Mauraja from East Nusa Tenggara", "The Origin of Lake Limboto from Gorontalo", "The Origin of Botu Liodu Lei Lahilote from Gorontalo", "La Upe from South Sulawesi", "Sawerigading from South Sulawesi", "Napombalu from North Sulawesi", "Alamona n'Tautama n'Taloda (First Man in the Talaud Islands) from North Sulawesi", and "The Four Sultans in North Maluku from Maluku".

The representation of women as objects of sexuality in the stories like "The Legend of Ile Mauraja", "The Origin of Botu Liodu Lei Lahilote", "The Origin of Limboto Lake", "Alamona n'Tautama n'Taloda" (First Man in the Talaud Islands), and "The Four Sultans in North Maluku" show similar motifs. These five stories have the same motive; they begin with a male character who accidentally sees seven beautiful women taking a bath. Girls are depicted as half-human beings, such as angels or other creatures. The male character then peeks at seven girls who are bathing and decides to steal a wing or other object that causes one of the youngest nymphs not to return to heaven. The girl is then married to a male character to have a child. However, the ending is not happy because someone will always separate them; whether they die or one of the characters (female) finds the object or wing and leaves the man. At the end of the story, a different motif is found in the Origin of Lake Limboto because women defeat male characters with their supernatural powers.

In "The Legend of Ile Mauraja" from East Nusa Tenggara, for example, it is told that one day a king who was looking for a goat got lost and entered a cave. However, he accidentally saw seven girls bathing in a river from the cave. He was fascinated and wanted to marry one of them. He took one of the garments and hid it in a tree hole. The clothes belonged to the youngest. They got married, but fateful fate made them burn to death (Samsuni, 2011c). The original story of Botu Liodu Lei Lahilote from Gorontalo also tells the same thing. However, in this story, the main character is a young man named Lahilote. One day Lahilote accidentally peeked and was fascinated by seven nymphs who were bathing in the lake. Lahilote then took one of the wings of the seven nymphs and hid it in the house. It made her unable to return to heaven. Lahilote comes back and pretends to help him. Long story short, Lahilote married the youngest angel and lived

in harmony until finally the youngest angel who had been tricked found her wings hidden by Lahilote and returned to heaven (Samsuni, 2009a). The same story of the Origin of Botu Liodu Lei Lahilote is also found in the story of Alamona n'Tautama n'Taloda (The First Man in the Talaud Islands) (Samsuni, 2010a), dan and the Four Sultans in North (Samsuni, 2010b). The thing that distinguishes the story of the Four Sultans in North Maluku is that the object stolen by the male character is a shawl.

The above four stories refer to the same scene, namely the desire of men to have women in the wrong way. They want to have women based on their physical image, which is beautiful. The objectification of the women in the story is practiced as women are treated as body parts or bodies that are only judged based on their utility. In the story, the description of the objectification of the female body is illustrated through the narrative and dialogue as found in the following Legend of Ile Mauraja:

How surprised he was when he saw seven beautiful girls bathing in the river in the cave.

"Oh... how beautiful those girls are!" murmured the King's with admiration.

Seeing the beauty of the girls came his intention to marry one of them. So, he secretly took one of the clothes from the girl that was placed on the river bank. Then he hid the clothes in a tree hole. (Samsuni, 2011c).

In the data above, women are objectified for their physical beauty. Similar representations are also found in other stories. In the original story of Botu Liodu, Lei Lahilote is described as "He then hid behind a big tree, then peeked out to check on the situation...He watched their every move without blinking an inch. The handsome young man was fascinated by the beauty of the girls." (Samsuni, 2009a) likewise in the stories of Alamona n'Tautama n'Taloda (The First Man in the Talaud Islands) and the Four Sultans in North Maluku. The woman in the story lives in a culture that places her body to be looked at, judged, and objectified (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). In fact, in the stories, "Alamona n'Tautama n'Taloda" (First Man in the Talaud Islands) and "The Origin of Lake Limboto", expressions of exploitation of the female body are described in a more vulgar way. In the story, "Alamona n'Tautama n'Taloda" (First Man in the Talaud Islands), verbal expression is expressed by "from behind the phone, he then observes the movements of the angels who are taking a bath. Wow, this is a really amazing sight. How beautiful those women are," murmured the Crab Man in admiration." (Samsuni, 2010a). Likewise in "The Origin of Lake Limboto", which is "from behind the tree, he watched the seven nymphs bathing until their eyes did not blink a bit." (Samsuni, 2009b).

In La Upe, Sawerigading, and Napombalu stories, female characters are visually exploited by male characters through their physical beauty (Samsuni, 2009c, 2009e, 2009d). Unlike the four stories above, in these three stories, the exploitation of women's bodies is expressed in the admiration of the female characters' physical appearance by the male characters. Through the description of physical beauty, the male's sexual desire is displayed. This picture needs to be taken seriously because the representation of women's bodies and the desire for male domination over women's bodies need to be viewed as social practices (Goffman, 1971) and systems of power (Laqueur, 1990). This picture, at the same time, confirms the dominance of men over women (Bourdieu, 2001). Women become weak figures who are displayed more with just their physical aspect. The

depiction of female intellectuals as human figures is not found in the story. Various descriptions found regarding the objectification of women in Eastern Indonesian folktales are in line with research findings on Western Indonesian folktales (Baiduri, 2015; Fauzar, 2019; Hapsarani, 2017; Iswara, 2019; Juansah et al., 2021). Women in folktales in the region also experience sexual discrimination in the form of objectification. The female characters in folktales tend to be passive, and the beauty aspect is the main attraction for male characters to get female characters. In addition, women become objects, especially of the sexuality of male characters.

Various representations of the objectification of women in stories are indeed very dangerous, especially when children consume folktales. Sexual objectification is the beginning of the emergence of sexual violence and it has significant consequences on one's understanding and perspective on sexual violence (Loughnan et al., 2013). When a person sexually objectifies another person, he will perceive that that party is lower than himself. The perception of women as objects of men, especially in terms of sexuality, is very dangerous for children's understanding of gender. Women are only seen as objects or commodities.

Women as an Exchange of Power

Women are objectified when they are seen or treated by others as objects (Nussbaum, 1995). Objectification works through the experience of treating a body that is judged in terms of its usefulness for (or consumption by) others (Hapsarani, 2017). In the folktales of Eastern Indonesia, two stories describe female characters as a medium of exchange of power. The two stories are "Sawerigading" from South Sulawesi and "Indara Pitaraa and Siraapare" from Southeast Sulawesi. This depiction cannot be separated from the use of the background of events during the royal period. In the story of "Sawerigading", the princess of the Chinese kingdom was used by her father to strengthen the ties of brotherhood with the kingdom of South Sulawesi. Putri does not have a role in participating in making choices in her life for the power of male characters (Samsuni, 2009e). Likewise, in the story of "Indara Pitaraa and Siraapare", the king's daughter became a gift for Indara Pitaara for helping to kill a giant snake. Putri has no power over her destiny and choices for the sake of perpetuating the king's power in this region (Samsuni, 2011a).

The objectification of women as a medium of exchange of power in both of the stories occurs because women do not have the power to make decisions. In both the stories as well as in almost many folktales from Indonesia, women are depicted as passive beings who do not have the power to have opinions or make decisions (Toha-Sarumpaet, 2010). The depiction in folktale almost entirely depicts decisions made by men. This condition has implications for the emergence of constructions regarding the nature that a woman must possess. A good woman is a woman who obeys the decisions of men. However, in the folktale above, the passivity of women causes them to become objects for the medium of exchange of power. Women become commodities for men's interests in perpetuating their power.

Women are Passive and Work in Domestic Areas

One of the methods of objectification of women is identifying a person based on his body or body parts (Langton, 2009). In Eastern Indonesian folktales, some depictions limit women's space based on identifying their physical condition. The female characters in the story are described as having only access to the domestic area. Women occupy a passive role and obey the male characters.

This is because women are depicted as physically weak characters and need men as their protectors.

In most of the stories, female characters are only described as having access to the domestic sphere. The female characters are tasked with taking care of household needs. In the story of *La Onto-Ontolu*, by the female character, Grandma, everything that deals with the kitchen area is done (Samsuni, 2011b). The grandmother figure is a representation of the depiction of the role of women in this region. Likewise, in the story of *Indara Pitaraa* and *Siraapare*, the mother character is depicted as the person who is responsible for the kitchen to meet the food needs of her children. Unlike the female characters, the male characters have access to get out of the domestic area. They have to work outside and even have access to leave the village to earn a living (Samsuni, 2011a).

The data shows that in the folktale of Eastern Indonesia, women are also described as being more dominant in the domestic sector. This picture is in line with the research findings conducted by Zahro et al., (2020), which state that in Indonesian folktales, female characters tend to maximize their potential in the domestic sector and ignore broader competencies. Moon & Nesi (2020), in their research on fairy tales from East Nusa Tenggara, also found that women have more roles in the domestic area. Women rarely appear in public. This means that the images of women in folktales, both in the Western and Eastern regions of Indonesia, tend to represent women's roles in the domestic sphere.

The placement of women's positions only in the domestic area is closely related to how men perceive women's physical strength. Many female characters in Eastern Indonesian folktales depict women as passive beings who have no will. Characters are treated as individuals who do not have the autonomy or ability to determine their desires (Nussbaum, 1995). For example, in the story of *La Onto-Ontolu*, the character Putri Bungsu must obey her husband's invitation to leave her family at the palace (Samsuni, 2011b). The female character is described as a good figure if she follows her husband's decision.

This picture shows the position of women in the family. A man is the head of the family as well as the protector of his wife and children. This construction influences how men view women's position as weak creatures who only need to work at home and wait for the results of men's hard work. Women's domestic roles and passivity are in contrast with the more dominant characteristics of men. Men have a much stronger physical body and can protect women. This depiction is emphasized in the *Legend of the Horn of Alam* story as a male character who comes to save a female character from being kidnapped (Samsuni, 2019). Similar stories are also found in several other stories. In this construction, men become patrons for women who nurture and protect.

Conclusion

This study aims to understand how women are depicted in Eastern Indonesian folktales. This understanding is mainly related to the objectification of female figures. Based on the analysis conducted on eleven folktales, it is found that many female characters in Eastern Indonesian folktales are subject to objectification. The objectification of female figures is carried out in the form of women as objects of sexuality, as a medium of exchange of power, and as being passive and working in the domestic sphere. This finding shows that the folktale of Eastern Indonesia

cannot be separated from patriarchal ideology. These stories show that women in the imagination of the Indonesian people still occupy an inferior position compared to men. Furthermore, the female characters also experience objectification and inequality as found in the folktales of Western Indonesia. The patriarchal point of view in the folktales has deep roots and spreads in Indonesia. Research proves that the ideology of folktale is not always in harmony with the ideal values that exist in society. It takes a critical attitude towards the selection of stories that will be conveyed to children.

Declaration of Conflicts of Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest.

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