

## **Gender Bias in Fairy Tales Narrative Analysis of The Folk Story Malin Deman and Puti Bungsu**

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### **Abstract**

The status and role of women in familial, social, and cultural contexts remain persistent themes in both modern and classical fiction, including traditional folk tales. For past generations, folk tales often served as a medium for expressing social realities and moral reflections, particularly concerning the position of women within the family. This research investigates the portrayal of women in the folk tale *Malin Deman and Puti Bungsu*, with the aim of describing and analyzing gender roles and biases embedded in the narrative. Using a qualitative method with a discourse analysis approach, the study relies on literature review and narrative analysis techniques, focusing on a feminist perspective. The results reveal three key findings. First, female characters are portrayed as passive, forgiving, non-aggressive, and aligned with traditional ideals of femininity. Second, these characters are depicted as incapable of altering their destinies without male intervention, reinforcing dependency. Third, women are shown as victims of male domination, abuse, and objectification. The study concludes that such representations reinforce entrenched gender stereotypes, promoting the ideal woman as beautiful, graceful, submissive, and helpless without male support. These portrayals pose a significant challenge to the feminist movement and the broader pursuit of gender equality in contemporary society.

**Keywords: Gender Bias; Women; Husband; Customs**

### **Introduction**

The status of women in the family and in social and cultural relations seems to be an endless topic of discussion in modern fiction, including ancient fiction such as folk tales or fairy tales. Folklore for our ancestors was often used as a means of conscience to express social phenomena related to the position of women/wives in a family. In fact, the past is an inevitability as a reflection of input for improving today's life. Folklore is part of the culture of a collective that is spread and passed down from generation to generation among any kind of collective, traditionally in different versions, both in oral form and examples accompanied by movements and signs or reminder aids (Danandjaya, 2007).

Most people identify folk tales as children's stories or fairy tales. Fairy tales are fictional stories that are not real or fictional, such as fables, sages, saga, myth and epic (Hana, 2011; Astuti & Tri Marhaeni, 2011; Fakihi, (2016). Ancient parents used these folk tales in the form of fairy tales as part of education to raise their children. The fairy tale really stimulates children's imaginations with a simple plot, magical characters, and a clear ending that good will defeat evil. Fairy tales always have a binary opposition, that is, they depict everything strictly in black and white.

Fairy tales for adults are an effective medium in conveying the noble cultural and religious values embedded in society. However, concerns arise because it turns out that most of the fairy tales that are currently being developed are fairy tales that display unfavorable stereotypes for women. In general, in fairy tales in lower middleclass life, women are depicted as inferior creatures. Fairy tales like this have negative consequences,

namely giving women a negative image. If we make an analogy, the female gender is always associated with women who are seen as people who are careless, don't think long, weak, and make the wrong decisions. This negative labeling, in the child's subconscious mind, will be imprinted that women are figures who are described by women as creatures who are weak and helpless and can be treated arbitrarily and are unable to help themselves without the support of men. This understanding will accompany growth in his life. Therefore, it is very possible that children will grow up with the understanding that boys consider themselves stronger, more rational, intelligent and powerful than girls, while girls will perceive themselves as gentle, emotional, unintelligent and motherly.

Riris (2010) states that there are four prominent motifs in traditional Indonesian fairy tales, namely: (1) obedience; (2) men's wrath and women's loyalty; (3) envy, envy, and sibling rivalry. He added that fairy tales are clearly sexist, full of social violence, male brutality, giving women very sad roles and identities. Riris believes that with several examples of fairy tales found in Indonesia, it can be said that what Indonesian children read and raise them is a tale that celebrates passivity, patience, sacrifice, dependence, including malice. This is why folktales that are said to be children's stories deserve a closer look because many of them contain content that is inappropriate for children. Inappropriate content includes (1) sexuality in the form of sexual urges such as in the stories of Sangkuriang or Bandung Bondowoso; cunning as in the story of Jaka Tarub; (3) malice as in the story of Bawang Merah and Bawang Putih; (4) sadism as in the story of the Oil Ketambuk; (5) gender bias which places women as weak creatures and can be treated arbitrarily like Malin Deman and Puti Bungsu. This should be a concern for children's story writers who repeat writing folk tales and publishers.

One of the traditional Minang folk tales is passed on by word of mouth and it is never known who told it first so it is anonymous. The traditional folklore is Malin Deman and Puti Bungsu. Traditional folk tales as ancient literature are spread through oral tradition with the aim of including solace (comfort) and messages conveyed by a storyteller. These folk tales, which developed in the land of Minang, especially in the West Sumatra area, were immortalized in a popular manuscript by A.A. Navis. The theme of the story is the marriage between humans and angels. This marriage occurred when humans and angels met in a forest at the foot of Mount Sago. Malin Deman, who is the main character, meets Puti Bungsu and her six siblings who are bathing in a Dewi Temple. Malin Deman kept her youngest's angel clothes or West Sonsong clothes, but bad luck came to Puti Bungsu so she had to marry Malin Deman. In this story, Malin Deman and Puti Bungsu were blessed with a child named Malin Duano from their marriage. They lived happily at that time like happy families in general. However, this happiness ended when Putri Bungsu found her clothes again. The youngest daughter also prefers to go back to heaven and leave her husband because her real residence is in heaven, not on earth (Navis, 2001).

These folk tales are told over and over again so that the teller or listener loses awareness that the story actually justifies or considers it normal that men peep, save the clothes of women who are bathing, and treat women as they please. If you want to use the fairy tale Malin Deman and Puti Bungsu which comes from local content or local wisdom, efforts to rearrange the story must be made. Efforts to restructure the story Malin Deman and Puti Bungsu need to be conveyed to Indonesian writers and publishers. Awareness of restructuring stories so that parents and teachers no longer raise children with traditional folk tales or fairy tales that are inappropriate for the growth and development of their souls under the pretext of local wisdom. In fact, by reading the story Malin Deman and Puti Bungsu and internalizing a similar story, children as story readers are surrendering themselves to patriarchal interests.

Discussions about the story *Malin Deman dan Puti Bungsu* were held by Sabakti (2016), with the title *Comparison of the stories Mahligai Keloyang and Koba Malin Deman*. The research conclusion, namely based on the structural analysis of the story structure analysis, found that the similarities and differences contained in the stories *Mahligai Keloyang* and *Koba Malin Deman* include elements of theme, characters, setting and plot. Through analysis of the cultural values in the two folk tales, similarities and differences regarding religious values, moral values and social values are obtained. Immerry & Dahlan (2017) with the conclusion of the research, namely the study of folklore from a structural-functional aspect by connecting each element of social structure with the pattern of choices that must be made, is regarding symbiotic relationships. Two Minangkabau philosophies, the philosophy of extinction and the philosophy of marriage, are found in the *Malin Deman kaba*. If there is an imbalance in these two philosophies it will become a problem in the community that owns it. People who own folklore must make choices that show a symbiotic relationship. Harmonization is the answer to get around this and is a function of folklore itself (Wiyatmi, 2012). Hakim (2014) with the research conclusions, namely the meaning of aesthetics such as wisdom, loyalty, reverence, awareness and hard work contained in this saga is a valuable heritage of society. On the other hand, this aesthetic meaning can also be seen as service that has a story to society. Whether they realize it or not, those who have stories teach people to behave aesthetically as depicted in the stories. The difference between this research and previous research is that this research provides an overview of women's roles, women's problems in carrying out their roles, and how women solve problems. This has not been revealed in previous research.

It is hoped that the results of this research will provide a good understanding of gender bias in folklore, which will be important material for every parent or teacher who cares about gender issues. It is hoped that the results of this research will enable parents or teachers to choose folk tales more wisely for their children.

In accordance with the description in the background above, the problem that will be revealed in this research is as follows. The problem in this research is how is the position of women presented in the folktale *Malin Deman dan Puti Bungsu*? This paper aims to reconstruct the position of women in classical fairy tales Indonesia entitled *Malin Demandan Puti Bungsu*.

## Method

This research employs a qualitative method with a feminist literary approach, focusing on the analysis of gender bias in the fairy tale *Malin Deman dan Puti Bungsu* by A.A. Navis. Feminist literary theory is used to examine the portrayal of women's roles, rights, and resistance to oppression within the text, guided by the understanding that feminism seeks equality between men and women in various social, political, and cultural domains (Sugihastuti & Suharto, 2010; Djajanegara, 2003; Mansour, 2016). The primary data source is the fairy tale itself, supported by secondary sources such as books, articles, and related literature obtained through literature study. The data collection technique involves reading and interpreting the text through narrative analysis, identifying elements that reflect gender bias. The data analysis process includes three stages: (1) inventorying data from the text related to gender bias, (2) identifying and interpreting data using feminist theory to reveal the positioning and treatment of women in the story, and (3) formulating conclusions based on the findings. Through this method, the research aims to provide a critical and detailed depiction of the unequal representation and marginalization of women in traditional literary narratives.

## Results and Discussion

### 1. Gender Bias in the Story Malin Deman and Puti Bungsu

In order to reveal gender bias in the folk tale Malin Deman and Puti Bungsu we will explain how women are told, shown and treated in the story. The existence of women in folklore contains interesting and complex issues regarding the relationship between men and women in Minang society.

#### a. Malin Deman Hides Sonsong Barat Bidadari's Clothes

The problem of oppression as well as curbing women's freedom is recorded in the folk tale Malin Deman and Puti Bungsu. Overall, female characters in the story are represented as women who are chosen, liked and owned. This can be seen in the following quote.

His name is a young man, Malin Deman. He left his house and went fishing in the river. Every morning, from downstream to upstream of the river, not a single fish can be found. Finally, when he was about to return home, he heard the sound of people chatting. He traced in the direction the sound came from. He saw seven Goddesses bathing and swimming in the lake. His heart was captivated by looking at one of the Goddesses. He stole clothes hanging from the branches of a tree belonging to the goddess. He hid it under his own clothes (Malin Deman and Puti Bungsu, 2001).

Based on this quote, it explains that from behind the tree on the edge of the lake, Malin Deman could clearly see seven beautiful women bathing. The beauty of the seven women stunned and fascinated Malin Deman. Malin Deman was also attracted by the beauty of the woman's very angelic face who was bathing in the lake. This folklore shows the inferior condition of women due to the superior behavior of a young man named Malin Deman. While fishing, Malin Deman accidentally saw seven women bathing in Dewi Lake at the foot of Mount Sago, but he only made one choice. Malin Deman's superiority image looks as if he can choose whichever he likes or wants. Women seem to be created as a choice that is ready to be owned. Overall, the character Puti Bungsu in the story is represented as the chosen woman. In a patriarchal society, men have power over all members of society, maintaining that power as their own and all events are seen from the male's point of view. Popular folklore for feminists is a story built on a patriarchal mindset that strengthens male power.

Malin Deman's observations determined that the prettiest was the youngest. This seventh angel was the youngest child and had six siblings. This seventh angel is described as the most charming so that her beauty is able to captivate the heart of the main male character in the folk tale Malin Deman and Puti Bungsu. He judges the Youngest Princess based on her external appearance alone, especially her very beautiful facial features. Most angels are female figures who have supernatural powers, described as having an alluring beauty so that men are tempted to have them as wives. The presence of the number seven in folklore can be interpreted as a symbol. It is said that the number seven is a lucky number. Atisah (2015) believes that in life many things are associated with the number seven. Somantri (2015) also researched the meaning of the number seven from a religious perspective in Indonesia. The number seven is associated with the Islamic religion, explaining that the number seven is believed in the Koran to have special features in various worship routines, the universe, and also history. Apart from Islam, the number seven is also believed in Christianity that this number is a symbol of God's perfection. Hinduism also believes that the number seven is a sacred number because it is believed that there are seven 'chakras' in the human body. Lastly, the number seven is associated with Buddhism, it is believed that the number seven implies holiness, so that anyone who follows the seven steps of the *dharma* will become rich, both materially and spiritually.

Thus, it can be concluded that the number seven has special qualities in life. The number seven is often believed to be a lucky number. If it is related to this folklore, the number seven appears by describing the seventh angel as the youngest child and having six siblings. The number seven in folklore is interpreted as good luck. As stated by Atisah (2015), the two seventh angel figures have good luck. This luck is shown in him being able to experience life in the human world. Even though his West Sonsong clothes or celestial clothes or hand shawl were lost, the angel figure was lucky because Malin Deman helped him by giving him a cloth covering as a replacement. Apart from that, the luck of the seventh angel is also present at the end of the folk tale when the character gets his West Sonsong clothes back so they can return to heaven.

When viewed from the storyline of Malin Deman, the folklore is indeed dominated by patriarchy which restrains women's freedom, discretion and independence in determining their path in life. When Malin Deman peeked, he managed to keep Sonsong Barat's clothes and got the seventh angel as his wife and had a son named Malin Duano, which is something that really takes away a woman's freedom. The incident of the angel who lost her clothes in Sonsong Barat is a vulnerable illustration of women's negligence or carelessness so that Malin Deman as a symbol of men can control her. This means the event of women being trapped in male domination or patriarchy. The event of the powerlessness of women whose clothes are hidden. This can be seen in the following quote:

Malin Deman knew that they would not be able to return to heaven without those clothes. He also knew that the angel who lost her clothes would continue to search for the flow of the lake water because she thought her clothes would be washed away. Therefore, Malin Deman waited for the lost Goddess at the bottom of the lake's flowing water. Malin Deman's guess was correct. While crying, the Youngest Princess asked. Young man, did you see my clothes float away? Malin Deman admitted that he didn't see him, but he asked, Who are you at dusk like this and still in the forest. Putri Bungsu tells who she is and that she will not be able to return to heaven without the Songsong Barat clothes (Malin Deman and Puti Bungsu, 2001).

Based on this quote, it proves that Malin Deman who wants to have the youngest daughter by hiding West Sonsong clothes is a representation of men's efforts to suppress women. The angel was helpless after losing her clothes and could not return to heaven because she could not fly. Feminism describes women who lose their clothes as helpless victims of patriarchal violence (Gamble, 2010). In this case, it seems like there is no opportunity for women to defend and save themselves against male superiority which leads women to be helpless in accepting masculine attitudes. This can be seen in the following quote:

Before dusk arrived, with feelings of sadness and grief the six goddesses returned to heaven. That left Puti Bungsu sobbing. Then he followed the water which was breaking away from the lake because he thought his clothes had been washed away by the lake water (Malin Deman and Puti Bungsu, 2001)

This quote states that the negative side of patriarchy is taking advantage of Puti Bungsu's negligence, who did not move when she was snooped on and hid Sonsong's clothes. The western is by Malin Deman, while on the positive side the depiction of Malin Deman is one of his qualities of respecting women. He also came to the angel by approaching, comforting and offering help. In the story, the angel accepted because she had no other choice but to accept Malin Deman's help. He is an angel who is trapped in a situation that requires him to find a way to survive. This provides an understanding of patriarchy which does not always oppress women. However, the positive side that emerges



from Malin Deman's character is weakened by the negative side presented in his actions of peeking at and keeping Sonsong Barat Puti Bungsu's clothes.

Puti Bungsu is an angel who comes from heaven, describing the figure of a woman who is beautiful, graceful, attractive and charming, but weak, careless, lacks self-awareness and is easily deceived so that she cannot return to heaven without West Sonsong clothes. West Sonsong clothes, such as lost self-esteem and identity and to cover up shortcomings or defeats, the angel was willing to be proposed to be Malin Deman's wife. The loss of Sonsong Barat's clothing signifies the loss of identity as an angel. The clothes given mark a new identity, as worldly creatures. Here we see women's negligence and carelessness being exploited by men to get what they want. Puti Bungsu is shown as a passive character and is treated as a woman who is dominated.

#### **b. Malin Deman Marries Puti Bungsu**

A man and a woman build a household for life by binding themselves in a marriage agreement. This agreement assumes there is love between them. Each individual has their own reasons for getting married. For most people, marriage is a noble calling. Marriage contains love and responsibility towards the person you love. Marriage unites oneself with someone of the opposite sex of one's choice to achieve mutual happiness. Ideally, marriage is the estuary of a river of love or affection and a combination of commitment between two individuals of different types. In this way, marriage can be expected to become a foundation of happiness for the couple who undergo it. According to Subekti (2013) marriage is a legal relationship between a man and a woman for a long time.

If it is related to the folk tale Malin Deman and Puti Bungsu, the marriage of Puti Bungsu and Malin Deman in this folk tale is doubted based on love but rather compulsion because she no longer had a choice. Typically, fairy tales that mention marriage are depicted as the pinnacle of women's happiness. However, marriage in the story is a condition of coercion that curbs women's freedom. Puti Bungsu wants to marry Malin Deman on the basis of love, which can be doubted. There is nothing wrong with getting married without any love in it. Although many parents say feelings of love can grow over time. The offer of marriage is seen as a way of surviving in a world that is foreign to an angel.

In the story Malin Deman and the Youngest Princess it is told that the seventh angel's clothes have the power to fly her back to heaven. Additionally, according to Atisah (2015) Angel clothing can also be said to be a symbol that has meaning. According to him, the role of clothing in legends such as the story of West Sonsong clothing has an important role because without these clothes the angel character cannot return to heaven. Puti Bungsu and its power are seen as a symbol of life, fertility and prosperity. This is indicated by the miracles he was able to perform. Malin Deman's indifference to the loss of Puti Bungsu's clothes is the root of women's suffering. Apart from that, the angel's clothes are important as a transactional tool because the character Malin Deman takes advantage of the situation by providing replacement clothes and making an offer to live together until the angel inevitably accepts the offer.

#### **c. Puti Bungsu Returns to Heaven**

The main female character in the story Malin Deman and Puti Bungsu is Puti Bungsu. She is a woman who dedicates her life to her husband and family. In the feminism group, this type of woman is grouped as a traditional type of woman who upholds her role as a wife. This traditional attitude sometimes defeats women because traditional women tend to be passive about situations. Apart from playing the role of wife, the youngest daughter is also a mother who devotes her attention to the family.

Sometimes a wife's loyalty to her husband is not responded well. Such situations, among other things, can cause conflict in the household. This also happened in the

household of Puti Bungsu, who made huge sacrifices for her husband, who was abused by her husband. In fact, after the birth of their son, Sutan Duano, Malin Deman turned into a lazy person. He no longer worked in the paddy fields and fields, instead spending a lot of time at the gaming table. Sometimes he wouldn't come home for days because he was busy gambling or cockfighting. The wife was very disappointed with Malin's behavior, which did not want to change. In other words, Puti Bungsu's husband was no longer responsible for his wife and children. For his daily life, his wife works in the rice fields.

In this story, Puti Bungsu's traditional attitude is depicted in the form of Puti Bungsu's devotion to her husband, namely always helping and accompanying her husband in carrying out his various jobs. In traditional society, the wife's attitude like that is part of the wife's duties and functions. For feminists, a wife's devotion to her husband is not prohibited. However, excessive devotion so that women are exploited by men is opposed by feminists. Such treatment of women means that women lose their right to develop their abilities. In this story, it can be concluded that Puti Bungsu was very devoted to her husband. Her husband's behavior made the youngest daughter sad, disappointed and angry. This caused him to cry often. He missed his sisters in heaven. The issue of violating your trust as a good husband is the peak of the marriage problems. Apart from the issue of breach of trust, Malin Deman in folklore was also dishonest from the beginning of his introduction that he hid West Sonsong Barat Puti Bungsu's clothes so he could have them. This method was successful, but the angel figure also knew about the dishonesty.

Differences in character are also a problem in the marriage between Malin Deman and Puti Bungsu because of the different places they live. Puti Bungsu lives in heaven, while Malin Deman lives on earth, so at the end of the story the two of them are told to separate. At the end of the story, Puti Bungsu accidentally finds her West Sonsong clothes. On the other hand, Puti Bungsu had a superior attitude when she realized that she had been cheated and she decided to return to heaven. Puti Bungsu, with her firm determination, was willing to leave Malin Deman. Men's position can be inferior to women, because in fact a firm and straightforward attitude is not only possessed by men, but also women. This can be seen in the following quote.

Puti Bungsu supported the old woman's head with a pillow after she fell asleep. He immediately climbed the old pole. It is true that the missing West Sonsong clothes were neatly wrapped in the paran. Use it immediately. Then, he carried Malin Duano. So they flew to heaven again (Malin Deman and Puti Bungsu, 2001).

This quote illustrates that Malin Deman's indifference opened the eyes of women as depicted by Puti Bungsu's discovery of West Sonsong clothing on an old paran pole. The event is interpreted as a moment of women's awareness about themselves and their rights as well as motivation to be free from the shackles of patriarchal domination. Finding West Sonsong clothes means rediscovering one's true self.

Malin Deman's violation of his trust as a good husband can be reflected as a punishment imposed on men and women as narrated in breaking promises. This can be seen in the following quote. When Malin Deman came home, he saw that his wife and children were not at home. His heart was beating, Puti Bungsu had found his heavenly clothes. Then, he climbed the old pole. There really isn't that shoulder there. Then, out came the wail, "Oh Puti. If you want to go to heaven, I won't stop you. But why did you go this way?" (Malin Deman and Puti Bungsu, 2001).

This quote shows that Malin Deman did not pay attention to his wife's threats. Finally, the wife went to heaven with her son. How surprised Malin was when he returned home and couldn't find his wife and children anymore. As a result of this incident, Malin Deman is very sorry for his actions which were not trustworthy regarding his attitude so far.

Through Puti Bungsu, women are invited to find the awareness to be independent, free. One of them is the freedom to marry without coercion, which is still found in the traditions of Minang society. Therefore, maintain a loving relationship by prioritizing honesty, mutual trust, and maintaining commitment, as well as continuing to respect and protect each other.

## **2. Alternative Rearrangement of the Story Malin Deman and Puti Bungsu**

The story Malin Deman and Puti Bungsu is not wrong because the story was created in the context of society in ancient times and was not necessarily intended as a story for children. Therefore, writers, publishers, and even readers must be able to select and sort folktales that are suitable or still relevant for children's stories today.

Writers of the folk tale Malin Deman and Putri Bungsu for children's stories or fairy tales should rearrange the story so that it is safe for children to read. Parts of the story that are not appropriate for children to read can be removed so that they do not appear in the story. This is certainly dangerous for children when identifying characters in stories. For example, in the story Malin Deman and Puti Bungsu, should children as readers feel sorry for Malin Deman who was left behind by Puti Bungsu or for Puti Bungsu because Malin Deman hid her West Sonsong clothes? Children as readers must be given the ease to identify characters in black and white, or evil and good.

Rearranging the story into a story that is safe for children to read requires effort from the author. However, it is actually not that difficult because the characterization, setting and plot of folk tales are simple and short. Writers can rebuild stories so as to remove parts that are thought to cause problems in children's minds.

Even if you want to use fairy tales or children's stories that come from local content or local wisdom or think that folklore is important for children to read, such as Malin Deman and Puti Bungsu, the author can make efforts to rearrange the story, it would be best to do so. Not all folk tales are appropriate to present to children. The government, through the Language Development and Development Agency, has pioneered a study of the appropriateness of folk tales that are spread before they are conveyed to children. Apart from that, the government through the Book Center has also tried to develop the concept of book leveling by taking into account the level of reading ability and children's psychology.

In its development, fairy tales have become an effective medium for educating children and for doing good deeds. Apart from that, fairy tales are also effective in conveying the noble cultural and religious values embedded in society. As a conveyer of noble cultural, religious and moral values, fairy tales should also contain stories that are free of gender bias. This can be done by telling fairy tales that do not contain gender-biased stories or characters. What can be done is to create new fairy tales based on a good understanding of gender. When creating a fairy tale, it must contain equal roles between women and men.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the analysis of women in the story Malin Deman and Puti Bungsu, it can be concluded that there are several things that need to be summarized to confirm gender stereotypes, namely that there are at least three findings obtained in this research. First, a woman's passive, obedient, devoted attitude displays a good female figure in accordance with her nature. Second, good women show an attitude of being unable to change their own destiny without the support of the man who is their husband. Third, women are victims of male abuse, power and ownership. The conclusions or results of this research confirm the gender stereotype that a woman who is worthy of being a dream wife is a



woman who is beautiful, has an ideal body, is helplessly weak, and is unable to help herself without the support of a man or her life partner. This shows that in dealing with women, the author does not show as mentioned by feminists that male authors generally present women as creatures who are in various ways suppressed, misinterpreted and trivialized by the dominant patriarchal tradition. This of course hampers the spirit of the feminist struggle for equality between women and men in this beloved country.

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