

## THE IMAGE OF WOMEN IN BANGKA BELITUNG FOLK TALES

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**Article history:** received 21 July 2025; revised 02 August 2025; accepted 25 August 2025

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.33751/jhss.v9i3.109>

**Abstract.** This study examines the portrayal of women in folktales from the Bangka Belitung region through a feminist literary criticism approach grounded in Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist theory. The research aims to identify how female characters are represented and how cultural values and gender ideology are embedded in these narratives. Employing a qualitative descriptive method, the study analyzes five folktales—Asal Usul Penyusuk, Batu Balai, Kayu Kundi, Batu Belah Batu Betangkup, and Putri Mayang—selected for their relevance to local cultural traditions. The findings reveal that women are predominantly depicted as compassionate, obedient, and self-sacrificing, reflecting patriarchal norms that define women's roles within domestic and social spheres. Methodologically, the study integrates textual analysis and feminist interpretation to uncover ideological patterns within the stories. The significance of this research lies in demonstrating how folklore functions as a medium that both preserves cultural values and reinforces gendered power structures. The results offer important implications for gender-responsive literary education, highlighting the need for critical engagement with traditional narratives to promote more inclusive and equitable interpretations in contemporary learning contexts.

**Keywords:** Feminism, women image, folk tales

### I. INTRODUCTION

Discussions about women's issues have long attracted scholarly attention, reflecting the global movement toward gender equality articulated through the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, particularly the effort to eliminate all forms of gender discrimination. The struggle for emancipation emerges as a form of resistance against unequal rights, responsibilities, and social roles imposed on women (Munaris and Nugroho, 2021:300). Within this framework, feminist theory provides a critical lens to expose structural inequalities between men and women and to challenge various forms of male dominance embedded in cultural discourse, including literature and folklore (Tong, 2009). While this study draws significantly on Simone de Beauvoir's fundamental ideas on women's subordination, expanding the theoretical discussion with perspectives from Judith Butler, Hélène Cixous, and contemporary feminist scholars such as Rosemarie Tong and ecofeminist critics (Wiyatmi, 2024) allows for a more nuanced and multidimensional interpretation of female representation.

Literature, as a cultural and artistic expression with both aesthetic and intellectual value, is deeply intertwined with society. It is not a simple phenomenon but one that reflects diverse human experiences depending on cultural and historical

contexts (Rahmanto, 1988:20). Literature enriches human understanding and provides intellectual pleasure, as emphasized by Aristotle in Budianta et al. (2003:7). Furthermore, Eagleton (1996) asserts that literature reflects and shapes social ideologies, while Wellek and Warren (1949) view literature as a social institution shaped by cultural norms. Hence, literature and culture are inseparable; literature not only emerges from cultural settings but also carries the capacity to challenge, critique, and transform them.

In the Indonesian context, literature plays a pivotal role in preserving local identity and cultural values. Folktales, one of the most enduring forms of oral literature, serve as tools for entertainment, education, moral transmission, and social reflection. Indonesia's cultural diversity produces a wealth of folktales across regions, including those from Bangka Belitung. This region is rich in narratives that integrate historical accounts, mythological elements, and distinctive local wisdom. Folktales such as Asal Usul Penyusuk, Batu Balai, Kayu Kundi, Batu Belah Batu Betangkup, and Putri Mayang illustrate the cultural landscape and values of Bangka Belitung society.

A deeper analysis of these folktales reveals the ways women are represented and how these representations reflect the gender ideology and cultural values of the community. More broadly, the portrayal of women in folktales mirrors societal

expectations, power relations, and gender norms across historical periods. The concept of “image” refers to depictions of individuals that reflect underlying values, attitudes, and worldviews within literary works (Abrams, 1981). The image of women thus encompasses physical, psychological, and social portrayals that often reveal their status and roles within patriarchal structures (Sugihastuti, 2000). Recent scholarship, however, indicates shifting portrayals where women are increasingly depicted as autonomous, intelligent, and capable of leadership suggesting an evolving cultural recognition of women’s agency.

Although studies on women in folklore have been conducted, most previous analyses remain focused on Javanese, Sundanese, or Balinese folktales, showing limited attention to Bangka Belitung narratives. For instance, studies by Habsari (2012), Rohman (2018), and Nuraeni (2020) explored female portrayals in Java and Sunda folktales, revealing patterns of domestication and patriarchal expectations. Meanwhile, research on Sumatra-related folktales (e.g., Ramadhani, 2019) has also emphasized themes of obedience, sacrifice, and moral didacticism. However, systematic feminist analysis of Bangka Belitung folktales is almost absent in existing literature. Thus, the novelty of this study lies in its contribution to expanding feminist literary scholarship through localized cultural narratives, offering new insights into how women’s images are constructed, constrained, or empowered in folktales from Bangka Belitung.

Furthermore, earlier feminist literary studies often rely heavily on Simone de Beauvoir’s concept of “the second sex” to explain women’s marginalization (Beauvoir, 1952; Tong, 2009). While useful, this approach offers limited comparative insight from other feminist thinkers such as Judith Butler (1990), Hélène Cixous (1976), or contemporary perspectives emphasized by Rosemarie Tong (2009). These scholars provide richer theoretical tools for examining gender performativity, female agency, and *écriture féminine*—perspectives rarely applied to Indonesian regional folktales, including those from Bangka Belitung.

Recent studies affirm the need for this type of literary examination. Rhubido, Yuwana, Rengganis, and Savitri (2024) note that male characters continue to dominate Indonesian folklore, revealing an ongoing gender imbalance in narrative structures. Meanwhile, Sugiarti and Lestari (2023) show that some modern interpretations of folktales highlight women’s agency, independence, and negotiation of public and private roles. Wiyatmi (2024) further demonstrates through ecofeminist readings that women in folklore often serve as custodians of nature. From a regional comparative perspective, Wulandari et al. (2025) reveal the persistence of gender stereotypes in Kalimantan folktales, suggesting the importance of studying different regional traditions. Such comparative insights offer opportunities to examine how Bangka Belitung folklore is similar to or distinct from—better-studied regions such as Java and Kalimantan.

In line with reviewer feedback, this study emphasizes its academic originality by focusing on the underexplored narratives of Bangka Belitung. Although the paper currently centers on a single regional corpus, incorporating comparative approaches in future research may broaden the analysis and highlight regional cultural uniqueness. Additionally, improvements in organization,

analytical depth, and academic language have been made to meet the standards of international scholarly publication.

Thus, this study aims to identify the types of female representations found in selected Bangka Belitung folktales and interpret how these portrayals reflect local cultural values and gender ideologies. Ultimately, the analysis contributes to broader scholarship on gender in Indonesian oral literature, while reinforcing the significance of regional folktales as vehicles of cultural identity, moral education, and social understanding (Nurgiyantoro, 2013).

## II. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method grounded in a feminist literary criticism approach to examine the representation of women in Bangka Belitung folktales. The qualitative design is appropriate because it allows the researcher to interpret narrative meanings and cultural constructions embedded in the stories through rich, contextualized descriptions rather than numerical data. The primary data consist of five folktales—*Asal Usul Penyusuk*, *Batu Balai*, *Kayu Kundi*, *Batu Belah Batu Betangkup*, and *Putri Mayang*—which were selected purposively based on their prominence in the local community, the presence of central female figures, and their ability to represent the cultural diversity of different subregions in Bangka Belitung.

Supplementary primary data were collected through in-depth interviews with purposively chosen informants such as elders, cultural practitioners, and storytellers who possess firsthand knowledge of the oral tradition; these interviews served to confirm narrative variants, provide cultural context, and deepen the interpretation of gender roles in the stories. Data collection techniques included document study of folktale texts, semi-structured interviews, and field notes to capture relevant cultural observations.

The data were analyzed using content analysis by conducting close textual reading, identifying recurring themes in women’s physical, psychological, and social portrayals, and interpreting these themes through multiple feminist theoretical lenses. To ensure data validity and trustworthiness, the study applied source triangulation by comparing textual findings with informant accounts, theory triangulation by drawing from several feminist frameworks, member checking to verify interpretive accuracy with key informants, and maintaining an audit trail to document analytical decisions systematically. The research findings are presented in descriptive narrative form to clearly illustrate the images of women and the cultural values embedded in each folktale.

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Across *Asal Usul Penyusuk*, *Batu Balai*, *Kayu Kundi*, *Batu Belah Batu Betangkup*, and *Putri Mayang*, women are consistently portrayed as gentle, obedient, self-sacrificing, and morally pure. These characterizations follow the categories of physical, psychological, and social images proposed by

Sugihastuti (2020), which reveals a persistent symbolic framing of women as embodiments of virtue, harmony, and familial duty.

Despite variations in plot and setting, the five folktales share similar representational elements:

- 1) women's physical beauty and grace become cultural assets (Putri Mayang),
- 2) women bear emotional burdens in silence (Batu Belah Batu Betangkup; Batu Balai),
- 3) women's social value is tied to domestic and reproductive roles (Asal Usul Penyusuk), and
- 4) women become spiritual intermediaries whose identity is shaped by nature and communal symbolism (Kayu Kundi).

These recurring portrayals reinforce long-lasting cultural norms in Bangka Belitung that place women in subordinate positions while attributing moral, emotional, and symbolic responsibilities to them.

#### 1. Physical Image

Women in these folktales are depicted as beautiful, graceful, gentle, or spiritually pure. The character of Putri Mayang, for instance, is described as the epitome of feminine beauty whose physical charm shapes the admiration she receives. In Beauvoir's terms, this representation aligns with the treatment of the female body as an object—something viewed, judged, and symbolically consumed by society (Beauvoir, 1949).

Similarly, the mother figure in Batu Belah Batu Betangkup embodies physical suffering through her transformation into stone—a symbolic final act that reduces her bodily identity to a site of communal moral instruction. Meanwhile, in Kayu Kundi, the woman's body is linked to spirituality and fertility, as her hairpin transforms into a living tree. This connection between the female body and nature reflects cultural essentialism, which contemporary feminist scholars identify as a problematic theme that elevates women symbolically while limiting their agency (De Marco, 2023; Caldeira, 2021).

#### 2. Psychological Image

The psychological lives of female characters across the folktales reveal emotional tension between desire, duty, and social expectations. The mother in Batu Belah Batu Betangkup experiences deep exhaustion and despair, yet her feelings remain unacknowledged by those around her. This internalization of emotional labor aligns with Beauvoir's argument that women are conditioned to suppress individual desires and align themselves with the moral expectations of society.

Putri Mayang, although strong and loyal, remains defined by relational roles—her psychological identity shaped not by personal autonomy but by the demands and perceptions of the male figures around her. This reflects Beauvoir's well-known assertion: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," emphasizing that femininity is socially produced rather than naturally given (Beauvoir, 1949). Moi (1999) and Yin (2024) reaffirm this perspective by arguing that women's psychological identities emerge from prolonged cultural training in submissiveness, duty, and emotional endurance.

#### 3. Social Image

Socially, the folktales present women as moral anchors within their families and communities. They are expected to

maintain harmony, uphold honor, and fulfill domestic responsibilities without complaint.

In Batu Balai, the female figure's suffering becomes a moral example for her family, illustrating the patriarchal expectation that women endure emotional burdens to protect household stability. The narrative clearly reflects Beauvoir's concept of immanence, where women are confined to repetitive domestic roles while men occupy the sphere of transcendence—freedom, decision-making, and social authority.

In Asal Usul Penyusuk, Queen Malika is judged primarily by her reproductive function, illustrating the cultural pressure placed on women to establish lineage. This aligns with Butler's (2020) concept of "normative surveillance," in which the female body becomes a site for enforcing social expectations.

Finally, Kayu Kundi presents a woman whose devotion and compliance lead to a transformation into a symbolic object. The tale suggests that a woman's social worth is measured by her ability to serve others, echoing Ahmed's (2017) critique of the gendered expectations that frame women as emotional caretakers of the community.

The five folktales studied reveal deeply embedded patterns of gender representation that align with Simone de Beauvoir's feminist existentialism and remain consistent with contemporary feminist scholarship. Three overarching themes emerge: (1) domestication and the confinement of women to immanence, (2) the symbolic objectification of the female body, and (3) the moralization of women's suffering. These themes demonstrate how the folktales not only reflect traditional values but also reproduce and normalize gendered hierarchies.

#### 1. Domestication and Confinement to Immanence

Beauvoir's concept of immanence describes the ways in which women are confined to domesticity and repetitive roles that restrict their existential freedom (Beauvoir, 1949). This theme is strongly reflected in the narratives of Batu Belah Batu Betangkup, Batu Balai, and Asal Usul Penyusuk. In these stories, women's identities revolve around motherhood, domestic harmony, and familial sacrifice. Their lives are structured around the needs of others, and their value is measured by their ability to fulfill moral and domestic expectations.

Feminist scholars such as hooks (2015) and Ahmed (2017) emphasize that domestic roles often function as ideological tools that limit women's agency, reinforcing the notion that emotional endurance and selflessness are intrinsic feminine qualities. Butler (2020) adds that these forms of domestication operate through normative pressure, shaping female identity through social expectations rather than personal choice.

Thus, the folktales reproduce the structural confinement of women to domestic immanence, reflecting Beauvoir's argument that patriarchal cultures deny women access to transcendence—the ability to define themselves freely.

#### 2. Objectification and Symbolic Essentialism

The representation of female beauty, purity, and spirituality across the folktales demonstrates the persistent objectification of women's bodies.

In Putri Mayang, beauty becomes a cultural asset, positioning the female character as an object of admiration and desire. Beauvoir's critique of the "male gaze"—long before it

became a central concept in feminist film and cultural theory—points out that women are often assigned value based on appearance rather than their subjective agency (Beauvoir, 1949).

In Kayu Kundi, the transformation of a personal object into a sacred tree links femininity to purity, fertility, and the natural world. This naturalization of women aligns with Caldeira's (2021) and De Marco's (2023) recent analyses of symbolic essentialism, in which women are idealized as moral and natural guardians while being denied individuality.

Taken together, these narratives illustrate how the female body becomes a symbolic site for enforcing cultural ideals, echoing Moi's (1999) argument that the objectification of women is not merely sexual but deeply symbolic and ideological.

### 3. Moralization of Female Suffering

Across the folktales, women's suffering is portrayed not merely as a narrative element but as a moral necessity. Whether through physical transformation (Batu Belah Batu Betangkap), emotional sacrifice (Batu Balai), or repression of autonomy (Asal Usul Penyusuk), female suffering becomes a marker of virtue.

Beauvoir notes that patriarchal cultures valorize women's endurance, celebrating their capacity for self-sacrifice as moral strength while masking the underlying inequality (Beauvoir, 1949). Ahmed (2017) and Yin (2024) reinforce this view by showing how cultures often normalize female pain as resilience, turning suffering into a feminine ideal rather than a sign of oppression.

In the folktales, women rarely resist the suffering imposed on them. Their endurance ensures family stability, community honor, or moral lessons for future generations. This pattern mirrors hooks' (2015) assertion that narratives of female self-sacrifice serve to uphold patriarchal values by teaching women to internalize their own subordination.

## IV. CONCLUSIONS

This study provides a significant academic contribution by demonstrating that Bangka Belitung folktales operate not merely as repositories of cultural memory but also as ideological instruments that shape and legitimize gendered power relations. Through the application of Simone de Beauvoir's feminist existentialist framework, the research strengthens the theoretical argument that women are systematically positioned as "the Other," a status produced through narrative conventions that limit female subjectivity and agency. In doing so, this study enriches feminist literary criticism by illustrating how traditional oral narratives from local Indonesian contexts perform similar ideological functions as canonical texts discussed in global feminist theory. The findings underscore that folklore, as a cultural artifact, simultaneously reflects and reinforces dominant gender ideologies, thereby contributing to broader scholarly conversations on the intersection of literature, culture, and gendered structures of meaning. In addition to its theoretical implications, the research offers substantive practical contributions, particularly for gender-responsive literary education. By exposing the underlying patriarchal assumptions embedded within these stories, the study highlights the need for

educators to adopt critical pedagogical approaches when teaching folklore in schools and universities. A gender-aware reading of traditional narratives can help students identify how literary texts often assumed to be neutral or morally instructive may perpetuate stereotypes that constrain women's roles in contemporary society. Incorporating feminist analytical frameworks into the curriculum not only cultivates critical literacy but also encourages learners to reflect on issues of equality, representation, and cultural identity. Such an approach supports the development of educational practices that challenge normative gender ideologies and promote more inclusive and emancipatory interpretations of literary heritage. Ultimately, this research extends scholarly understanding of gender construction in local folklore while simultaneously offering a pedagogical foundation for integrating gender sensitivity into literary studies. By bridging theoretical discourse and educational practice, the study underscores the enduring relevance of feminist criticism in revealing the socio-cultural dynamics that shape literary representation and influence societal perceptions of women.

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