

# Empowering Girls, Educating Boys:

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# Empowering Girls, Educating Boys: *Rara Janitra* and Indonesian Folktale Reconstruction

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## Abstract

It has been widely known that stories for children are never simple stories. They are not just simple stories to entertain. Children stories generally contain strong edifying elements to educate children. These elements are especially stronger in folktales than in other genres of children stories. Folktales are highly instructional that are geared to inform, to instruct and to prepare children to be acceptable and proper members of society. Unfortunately as societies change, a large number of folktales remain unchanged. This concern is especially true in Indonesia's case. Although many of the country's folktales contain useful teachings for children, not all of them contain teachings that are relevant to today's values, and a number even contain teachings that are not positively constructive.

This paper discusses *Rara Janitra*, a reconstruction or modern retelling of an old Indonesian folktale titled *Rara Jonggrang*. The discussion is mainly on how *Rara Janitra* can be a more constructive version for Indonesia's new generation to empower Indonesian girls and to educate Indonesian boys.

*Keywords:* children literature; Indonesian folktale; reconstruction.

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## 1. Introduction

Stories for children, as has been generally known, are used not only to entertain children, but most importantly to educate them (Citraningtyas, 2011). Children stories are stories that are far from simple and neutral stories. They are stories of many agendas, for they are equipped and loaded with teachings that prepare and instruct children to be acceptable members of society.

The educative elements of children stories are considered the strongest in folktales if compared to any other genres of children literature. Folktales are one of the world's oldest teaching tools and can be found in all societies (Spagnoli, 1995). They are intentionally written to educate children (Zipes 2002). Through the values handed down from generation to generation, folktales are also used to 'shape' nations (Johnston, 2000; Citraningtyas, 2010). In large part, a nation's values are handed down through folktales that have been passed down through generations by word of mouth then through printed materials, and more recently, digital. This is one of the main reasons why many parents and educators put their entrustment so much in folktales as stories that are profoundly useful for children, as stories that contain noble values handed down from the ancient time. Being the main decision makers for the reading materials for children, parents and educators are highly likely to include folktales in their choice of books for children. Moreover folktales become a suitable medium to hand down desired values throughout history due to its stable and repetitive structure.

Indonesian folktales, too, have been used as a pervasive tool in sustaining cultural heritage and furthering the nation's traditional values from generation to generation. Citraningtyas (2004), however, has since found that a number of Indonesian folktales contain disturbing endings that make them different from the folktales of other countries. Many Indonesian folktales often end with destructive elements, or end with a catastrophe. A famous example is an Indonesian tale titled *Malin Kundang*, a tale about a young man being cursed to be a stone by his own mother for failing to acknowledge her after a long separation. Besides *Malin Kundang*, there are still many other Indonesian folktales that end with destructive messages. This is very different and even in opposition to folktales from many other countries that often end with freeing the subject from a curse or catastrophe. *Cinderella*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Snow White* and *Beauty and the Beast* are a few of the famous examples of folktales that end happily with the characters freed and liberated from their curse so that they can "live happily ever after".

The Indonesian nation is rich in folktales. Unfortunately the nation's many destructive and unconstructive folktales have become alarming, especially when the tales are aimed at forming a national identity for future generation. Such folktales that end with curses, insults, harshness, calamitous punishment, and other negative aura may shackle Indonesian young people and hinder them from developing. Cursing a child to be a cold and dead element such as a stone, may prevent children from developing. Rather than being productive, children who receive such teachings may be constrained from being worthwhile and producing – such a great loss for a nation. Moreover, this kind of ending may teach the children that that it is customary and rightful for an authority figure to curse their subordinate. As a result, Indonesian will grow to be an unforgiving nation that is easy to curse, and difficult to advance.

If children literature, especially folktales, is believed to form a national identity, a serious question should be posed. Are folktales that feature destructive punishment still relevant to today's readers? Should these folktales continue to be transmitted to young generation as it is? Should there not be any adjustment made to make these folktales to be more relevant to today's readers? The Indonesian Minister of Education and Culture of Indonesia, Anies Baswedan, had recently called for a change to Indonesian folktales: "our folktales must also grow and evolve with times." (Republika, 2015). This is an important calling that must be responded with great enthusiasm. Such folktales must be rewritten and reconstructed for the betterment of human capital. The changes made should be more in line with the demands of positive modern values.

## 2. Relationship with Previous Studies

A long list of previous studies have proven that folktales are not lifeless. As early as 1975, Bradkūnas likened tales as a living plant: “*Tales, just as plants, adapt to a certain environment through natural selection and thus differ somewhat from other members of the same species*”. Therefore folktales must grow and adapt with human civilization. They do not die and stop growing after its publication. Tales that apparently send negative teachings to readers must be reconstructed.

Folktales reconstruction is a form of rewriting a folktale to remove and replace the undesired parts but still maintain the good ingredients to make it more constructive and adapt to today’s changes (Citraningtyas, 2012). Based on previous studies performed, Citraningtyas et.al. (2012 – 2014) have proven that reconstruction version of an Indonesian folktale have positive impact on Indonesian child readers. Citraningtyas et. al.(2013) conducted a study on 141 Indonesian child readers to measure their readiness to forgive in a variety of situations. The respondents were divided into two groups: the control group and the experimental group. The respondents in the control group were reading *Malin Kundang*, a traditional Indonesian folktale about a mother cursing her only son for failing to acknowledge her. The respondents in the experimental group, on the other hand, were reading *Nilam Kandung* (Citraningtyas et.al. 2014), the reconstruction version of the folktale. Both groups were then asked to give their response on whether or not they will forgive people who do them wrong in a variety of situations. The result of the study proved that the experimental group who read the reconstruction version of the tale was more ready to forgive people. This is an example of a noble character worth having and much needed for a nation like Indonesia.

Citraningtyas et.al. (2014) also conducted a study to compare and contrast the self-efficacy of Indonesian child readers, between those who were only exposed to *Malin Kundang*, and those who were exposed to *Nilam Kandung*. A high self-efficacy is believed to be beneficial for the increase quality of human capital, and thus, the advancement of a nation can progress with better quality of human resource. Albert Bandura (1977, 1986, 1992, 1997) affirms that if a person believes to be capable of accomplishing a task, he or she will persevere longer and is more likely to succeed due to this perseverance. On the contrary, if a person does not think to be capable of performing a task, he or she will give up easily, and thus will unlikely succeed in the task.

The subject of the study conducted by Citraningtyas et.al. was 95 students aged 9 - 12 who were divided into control and experimental groups. Both groups received the same treatments to measure academic, social and emotional self-efficacy: pre-test, treatment, and post-test. During the treatment, the control group is exposed to *Malin Kundang* tale, while the experimental group is exposed to *Nilam Kandung*. The findings confirm that a tale reconstructed to have more positive endings will result in positive effect to the readers’ self-efficacy. Respondents from the experimental group experienced increases in their self-efficacy score. When the young generation of a nation has increased self-efficacy, it is highly advantageous for the advancement of the nation.

The results of these studies show how folktales that are reconstructed positively will result in positive outcomes. If folktales are said to shape a nation, the nation’s young generation will be shaped to better quality due to this positive reconstruction.

## 3. Folktale Reconstruction

What is and how does tale reconstruction work? The English word *reconstruction* is taken from the word *to reconstruct*. According to Merriam-Webster dictionary it means to establish, to form, to assemble again, or to reassemble. Applying the dictionary meaning of the word to folktales, it can be concluded that tale reconstruction is to rebuild existing tales with the aim to correct errors and fix parts that are not constructive, or change values that are not anymore suitable to today’s readers.

In many parts of the world, folktale reconstruction is not a new entity and has been done throughout history to a number of well-known tales. The famous example of this would be the well-known tale of Cinderella. Cinderella

has gone to a number of changes throughout centuries to adapt with societal changes. As we know it, <sup>1</sup>Cinderella was first written by Charles Perrault in 1697 entitled *Cendrillon*.

In the Brothers Grimm's version, published in 1812, we read how the stepsisters 'were punished with blindness as long as they lived'. As society changes to a more forgiving society, we now know that Cinderella has forgiven the stepmother and stepdaughters and the <sup>1</sup>tale ends in living happily ever after: an ending that is more constructive and more acceptable to today's society. In the recent movie version by The Walt Disney, Cinderella clearly says "I forgive you" to her stepmother. In some modern versions, Cinderella even invites her stepmother and stepsisters to live with her.

The ending of another well known folktale *Little Red Riding Hood* has also gone through a number of changes. In its version by an unknown author, Little Red Riding Hood manages to escape from the wolf, and is safe. Then in the version written by Charles Perrault in 1697, the folktale ends with Little Red Riding Hood gets eaten by the <sup>1</sup>wolf. However in the modern versions that we know today, that sad ending is added with a relieving element. The modern versions feature a hunter or a huntsman who are hunting wolf-skin. The hunter kills the wolf and saves the Little Red Riding Hood and the Grandmother. This happy ending version is deemed to be more appropriate for younger audience today. Happy endings pedagogically relieves children's tension and give them hope in facing challenges in life.

The changes in the above well-known folktales are proof that tale reconstructions are normal and necessary. These are all evidence that folktales adapt to society's need. As society changes, folktales must also change to adapt.

(1)

#### 4. *Rara Jonggrang*, the Original Tale

*Rara Jonggrang* is the title of a popular folktale from Central Java, Indonesia. The tale is also known as *The Legend of Prambanan Temple*, and is very popular in Indonesia. So popular is the tale that recently (in March 2016), it has been made into a modern soap opera version that gained high popularity.

The corpus of the story discussed here is mainly based on the most popular e-version, that had 21.395.438 hits on 4 May 2016 since 20 January 2009. It is a story about a young and beautiful princess named Rara Jonggrang. Rara Jonggrang was the only daughter of King Baka who ruled Prambanan. One day the kingdom was attacked by another kingdom, led by a cruel knight named Bandung Bondowoso who has supernatural power. Bandung Bondowoso killed King Baka and took over the kingdom. He then wanted to marry Rara Jonggrang, who was reluctant of marrying a man who killed her father and whom she did not love. However, she knew the consequence of refusing such proposal. So, she challenged Bandung Bondowoso to build 1000 temples single handedly in one night before marrying her, as a way to refuse politely. The challenge was accepted, and Bandung Bondowoso built the temples with the help of the genies and his supernatural powers. Just before dawn, the project was almost complete. Roro Jonggrang quickly orchestrated an early dawn to stop Bandung Bondowoso from finishing the project because she did not want to marry him. Bandung Bondowoso was so mad when he learned that Rara Jonggrang faked an early dawn just when he needed to build one more temple. So Bandung Bondowoso cursed Rara Jonggrang to be the 1000th temple to complete his project. So Rara Jonggrang turned into a statue and can be seen at Prambanan Temple.

Although very popular, this folktale sends some disturbing messages to readers. *Rara Jonggrang* teaches that women are no more than mere objects in society. As objects, women are common gifts or trophy of honor for men winners. Women serve as prizes for many occasions. A woman can be a prize for a prince who wins a challenge; for a King who seizes another kingdom; for an ogre who defeats a humble farmer – who can be the woman's father or husband; even for a robber who loots a village or for the murderer of the girl's father. Rara Jonggrang was the

price for Bandung Bondowoso who was able to seize her father's kingdom, and killed her father, King Praba. Rara Jonggrang did not love Bandung Bondowoso. She did not want to marry a man who killed her father either. But she knew that she was powerless and did not have the courage to refuse. She knew that as a woman, it was not her place to refuse such proposal. Rara Jonggrang's action teaches women to understand their position as an object, as a subordinate. Tales like Rara Jonggrang teaches women that it is normal and customary for women to be powerless objects. The continuous promotion to read the tale will reinforce such value.

Besides sending negative messages to girls, such folktales also send adverse teachings to boys. Through tales like this, boys are taught that they are superior and powerful. Boys learn that they are superior against girls. Feeling as a superior, Bandung Bondowoso assumed the right to take Rara Jonggrang to be his wife, without anyone's consent – not even hers.

When Rara Jonggrang sent him a sign of refusal by giving him a challenge to do, Bandung Bondowoso took it lightly. Thus he assumed the right to do the challenge with the help of his supernatural power and his genie friends although Rara Jonggrang asked him to do it single-handedly. However, he was very angry knowing that Rara Jonggrang orchestrated a fake dawn. He felt that he had the right and power to curse Rara Jonggrang to be a stone. Being a stone, Rara Jonggrang became inhuman, dead, and useless. Being a stone statue that can be seen by public to the present date, Rara Jonggrang serves as a strong warning for Indonesian women. The statue reminds Indonesian women that those who dare to refuse the wish of a man can have the same fate as Rara Jonggrang: dead, useless, and humiliated. The *Rara Jonggrang* tale thus educates boys that they are more powerful than girls, and that it is normal to exercise that power. The Rara Jonggrang statue that draws millions of tourists each year, serves as a constant reminder to that teaching.

The impact of this power exercise is profoundly apparent in Indonesian society. One evident is the high profile of sexual crimes against girls in Indonesia. In April 2016 for example, Indonesia had to witness a sad case, where a 14 year old school girl was gang-raped and murdered by 14 boys. Despite the cruelty of the case, many Indonesians, including women, blamed the victim in the case. This is not the only recent rape case in Indonesia. In May 2016 alone, a string of other rape cases reached the media: a 2-year-old toddler was raped and murdered; a 12-year-old student was allegedly raped; another 12-year-old girl was raped by four men; 19-year-old teenager was gang-raped by up to 19 men; while a 16-year-old high schooler was raped by a van driver. Indonesia also has a dark history on the massive gang rapes that happened during Jakarta riots in May 1998. It is unfortunate that this long list of cases are only the ones that have made the media as rapes and sexual assaults are commonly underreported in Indonesia.

Although it is premature to claim the direct relationship between the reading of folktales such as *Rara Jonggrang* and the high incidents of rape in Indonesia, there is a disturbing paralel between the values held in the tale and the structure commonly found in rape cases. Kalra and Bhugra (2013) stated that the occurrence of sexual violence is more common in cultures that nurture beliefs of perceived male superiority and inferiority of women. *Rara Jonggrang* seems to hold a teaching about male superiority and female inferiority.

Folktale is one medium to educate and nurture values held by society to be passed on to the next generation. If this contains disturbing messages, it has to be reconstructed. The reconstruction of such disturbing folktales will in turn reconstruct disturbing values in society.

##### **5. *Rara Janitra*, a New Tale to Empower and Educate**

*Rara Janitra* (Citraningtyas, 2015) is the reconstructed version of *Rara Jonggrang*. *Rara Janitra* was written with a purpose to empower girls to realize some of their rights, and to educate boys to refrain from exercising power and superiority irresponsibly against girls. Due to the reluctance of the Indonesian public, the reconstruction version of *Rara Jonggrang* is given a different title as the original tale.

The names of characters in *Rara Janitra*, though different, has the same meaning as the characters in *Rara Jonggrang*. Rara Janitra, just like Rara Jonggrang, means a beautiful young slender girl. Bandung Bondowoso is given the name of Arta Balakosa, that means a young man than has power and money. The names of other characters, as well as the setting of story, have all similar meaning. This similarity of names is deliberate to send a message that the same character, who lives at the same setting, can actually be empowered and educated.

The beginning and the middle part of the story in *Rara Janitra*, goes the same way as in *Rara Jonggrang*. Reconstruction is done at the most crucial element of the folktale, beginning from the challenge scene. Arta Balakosa agreed to build one thousand temples single handedly in one night, as a prerequisite to marry Rara Janitra. Without anyone's consent, Arta Balakosa uses the help of his secret army: the genies, fairies and other spirits. It is unsurprising that he is able to do the project quicker. Approaching dawn, Arta Balakosa almost completes all the temples, and it makes Rara Janitra anxious. She is tempted to orchestra a fake dawn to stop Arta Balakosa from finishing the project so that she does not need to marry him. However, she is reminded of his father's teaching to never fool anyone. At last, Rara Janitra tries to be brave and decides to negotiate with Arta Balakosa. She tells him in a firm voice that she still does not want to marry Arta Balakosa, even if he finishes the temples. It is because she does not love him. She continues by challenging him whether he still wishes to marry someone who does not love him. Though looking shocked at first, Arta Balakosa at last admits that he, too, does not want to marry someone who does not love him. However, he does not want to be known as a loser, who fails to complete the challenge he is asked to. He has finished 999 temples. Rara Janitra helps Arta Balakosa to finish the last temple. Arta Balakosa does not force Rara Janitra to marry him, and he is still known as a person who finishes the challenge. They both find a win-win solution and live happily ever after.

The reconstruction to make Rara Janitra withdraws her intention to orchestra a fake dawn and decides to negotiate with him is an important lesson to empower Indonesian girls. The traditional version of the folktale, and many other Indonesian folktales and stories, rarely teach girls to negotiate with boys. Girls are oftentimes stereotyped as human beings who use their emotion too much and are bad at negotiating. Girls are also stereotyped as human beings who should keep quiet at all times. This is also a reflection of the real life condition, where girls in Indonesia are rarely taught to negotiate and are encouraged to stay quiet. Rara Janitra gives an example to girls that women are allowed to speak up and more importantly, they can negotiate too.

Rara Janitra then openly says that she does not want to marry Arya Balakosa because she does not love him. Voicing her feeling is also an important empowerment for Indonesian girls. In its traditional version, Rara Jonggrang never tries to speak up that she does not wish to marry Bandung Bondowoso. Not speaking up and being submissive is a value highly upheld for Indonesian girls. Indonesian girls are not generally encouraged to express their feelings. This teaching is reinforced through folktales read for children. However, this kind of value should must change as time and situation changes. Rara Janitra is a reconstructed folktale that empowers Indonesian girls to express their opinion, especially when expressing disagreement to a form of oppression.

Arta Balakosa who accepts Rara Janitra's refusal, though he still does not want to appear as a loser, serves as an example for boys. Arta Balakosa can be a model for boys. He is willing to listen to Rara Janitra's refusal. He does not exercise his power and force to save his ego, but he is willing to think logically in not marrying Rara Janitra.

When girls are empowered to express their disagreement, and boys are educated on how to refrain from exercising their power, abuse against women can be reduced. Therefore, folktales that reinforce teachings on such empowerment and education is highly relevant and needed. It is all for the bettermen of future generation.

## 6. Conclusion

Folktales have been functionally pedagogical for many centuries. Folktales are highly trusted to educate children to expected behavior, and to pass on the approved values. However, as society changes, folktales must grow and adapt for the betterment of young generation. It is clear that *Rara Janitra* empowers girls and educates boys Indonesia to reconstructed approved values in Indonesian modern society. Through this renewal of teachings,

Indonesian future generation is expected to be better.

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