

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF FOLKTALES TO CHILDREN: URGENCY FOR A RECONSTRUCTED TALE

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ABSTRACT

Literature is Dulce et Utile (Horace c. 13 B.C.), but children literature is more accurately to be Utile et Dulce. This exchange of order is to show how children literature is never a neutral entity. The aim of children literature is primarily to educate, and only then to amuse. There is always pedagogical element that is placed before entertaining element in children literature. This concept of Utile et Dulce in children literature is even more strongly present in folktales. Folktales are often believed to be texts that possess power in educating children and in shaping them to approve behavior. The pedagogical power of folktales is widely shared by parents and educators and thus they are eager to introduce folktales to children from a very early age, making folktales to be a potent medium to carry moral education from generation to generation. This paper argues that being a legacy, folktale is not and must not be a lifeless and stagnant narrative. As values change over centuries, folktales must be rewritten and reconstructed to adapt to change in society. The need to rewrite and reconstruct a tale is more urgent in tales that carry obsolete values or principles that are not believed anymore. This paper provides evidence on the urgency to reconstruct a long-established Indonesian folktale that carries unconstructive values. This is proven by comparing how the traditional and its reconstructed version of the tale affect child readers in their decision towards a number of moral judgments that involve forgiveness. Children aged 9 – 12 are contrasted on their willingness to forgive prior to and after reading a traditional and a reconstructed version of the tale. The result of the study shows how a correctly reconstructed folktale can influence child readers in positive ways.

Field of Research: *folktale, children literature, education, child readers.*

1. Introduction

According to Horace (*Ars Poetica*, c. 13 B.C.) poetry is *Dulce et Utile*. Poetry or literature must entertain its readers, while at the same time it is useful. In children literature, however, the desire to educate is almost always much greater than the desire to entertain. Children literature is thus *Utile et Dulce*, as its main aim is primarily to educate children, and only then, to provide entertainment (Citraningtyas, 2010). There is a constant pedagogical element that is placed before entertaining element in children literature. As John Stephens states (1992, p.3)

“writing for children is usually purposeful, with the intention of fostering in the child reader a positive appreciation of some socio-cultural values. Since children are seen as a culture’s future, children’s writers often assume the task of trying to mould audience attitudes into ‘desirable forms’.

Children literature is functionally pedagogical for children. Children learn a lot from reading their literature: they increase vocabulary size, they learn different skills and knowledge, they learn values, they enrich lives, and they enhance imagination. Children literature is an edutainment for children (Citraningtyas, 2011). Because of these rich uses of children literature, parents and educators are

enthusiastic to ask children to read children literature. Among different genres of children literature, folktales will usually win the heart of parents and educators as their popular choice.

Folktales are one genre of children literature that is the strongest in educating children. They are believed to transfer valuable moral education to children. Since the Enlightenment Period, folktales had been deliberately written for children and aimed at educating them (Zipes, 2002). Folktales had been trusted to conveniently transport values from generation to generation. They are more than just children story for they are able to survive across history. Scholars believe that folktales have a greater impact in the psychological and moral development of children than other forms of literature. Robbins (1998), for example, contrasts folktales with regular children story, and claims that folktales go further by reaching into a child's subconscious. Folktales seem as if they are expressing our desires because we have taken up their standards since childhood. Thus their legitimacy may continue to be unquestioned (p. 101).

Through a small survey conducted in Children Literature class at Universitas Pelita Harapan Indonesia, Citraningtyas (2011) found that students remember folktales more than any other children stories. Thirty students were asked to quickly mention two children texts they know. Fifty out of sixty stories they mentioned were folktales. It is important to note that even though the students had been exposed to different genres of children literature in the course, 83% of the stories they recalled were the folktales. This result reaffirmed other scholars' findings that folktales stay longer in people's mind than any other forms of children literature.

Folktales are also stable in structure, and this steadiness has made folktales to be a convenient vehicle to carry values easily to children from generation to generation. Due to this exceptional role that folktales play, it is unsurprising that folktales can easily charm parents and educators. They will readily select folktales as high-quality readings for their children for folktales are derived from authentic cultures, and therefore they can never be wrong.

2. The Urgency to Reconstruct Disturbing Folktales

Although folktales are believed to have all of the great ingredients for children, not all folktales are sterile from negative impacts for children. Despite all the eagerness of educators and parents to choose folktales as good reading for children, educators and parents must carefully observe the agenda and the values contained in folktales. Wisdom and insight are needed to evaluate values that are contained in folktales for surprisingly not all folktales are sterile from negative teachings.

Indonesians are familiar with a long-established tale that is unlike many other folktales worldwide, entitled *Malin Kundang*. So well-known is the tale that it will be almost impossible to find any Indonesian today who has not heard of or read the tale. Despite its enormous reputation, the tale contains a disturbing value. It is a tale about a man cursed to be a stone by his own mother due to his unfilial conduct of refusing to recognize his mother. To the present day, the tale has often become a reference for Indonesians to exercise disciplinary measures from the authority to the subordinates (Citraningtyas, 2010). The tale has also become the corpus for many other Indonesian folktales. There are at least 12 other folktales from different parts of Indonesia that have similar endings like *Malin Kundang* (Citraningtyas, 2004). This strong net of similar tales serves to ensure the transformation of values contained in the tale throughout Indonesia.

In 1994 – 2004, *Malin Kundang* became the only tale incorporated in the textbook of Indonesian elementary school children (Citraningtyas, 2004). According to Citraningtyas (2010), materials or texts are not just accidentally included in a textbook or incorporated in a curriculum. All materials or texts that are successful to be incorporated in a school curriculum have gone through government's tight selection and assessment. Those texts have to fulfill a number of criteria set out by the government. One of the criteria is generally on the belief that the text is first-rate to be used to shape children to be

an ideal citizen. Therefore for *Malin Kundang* to be able to be included in the text book of Indonesian schools, it has definitely fulfilled the criterion. The tale is believed to have the power to shape and nurture the national identity of Indonesia. (Citraningtyas et.al., 2012).

This paper aims to promote a reconstruction of the tale. Being a legacy, a folktale is not and must not be a lifeless and stagnant narrative. As values change over centuries, folktales must be rewritten and reconstructed to adapt to change in society. The need to rewrite and reconstruct a tale is more urgent in tales that carry obsolete values or principles that are not believed anymore. A tale like *Malin Kundang*, and many other similar tales in Indonesia whereby a child is cursed to be an unproductive, dead, and cold matter such as a stone, may enchain the Indonesian young generation and prevent them from being productive. This unforgiving action from a figure of authority to a subordinate, who makes a fixable mistake and who is sorry for the mistake, is not healthy for the future of Indonesian young generation. Moreover, through this tale, children may see that it is normal and legitimate for an authority to curse the subordinate. As a result, Indonesian will grow to be an unforgiving nation that is easy to curse. This understanding needs to be changed.

Many educators and parents today often express their disagreement to the ending of the *Malin Kundang* tale. In a research done by Citraningtyas in 2004, it was found that the majority of Indonesian children, as the target of the tale, disagreed that Malin is cursed to be a stone. From 279 elementary school children, 99,9% of respondents agreed that Malin was punished, but 59% disagreed that the punishment was being cursed to be a stone. This is a proof that the Indonesian younger generation would like to see that Malin is freed from his stone state and given a second chance, even though there is still a consequence that Malin needs to face for his wrongdoings.

A reconstruction to such tale is therefore urgently needed. What is a tale reconstruction? Reconstruction, according to Merriam-Webster dictionary is 'to establish' or 'to assemble again'. Something is reconstructed because there is a need to make it better or stronger. A building, for example, is reconstructed to revamp its looks and strengthen its structure. A physical reconstruction is needed to correct certain defect in the body. If applied to a tale, reconstruction will mean to assemble again an available tale with the purpose of making it better. The parts that are old and not usable anymore are changed with a new better and stronger part (Citraningtyas, 2012).

Throughout history, this tale reconstruction has been done to a number of well-known tales. One well-know example is the reconstruction done to a popular tale, *Cinderella* that has undergone a number of changes over the centuries to adapt with societal need. One major change was done to the 1634 version of the tale that ended with Cinderella killing his stepmother. The 1812 version of Brother Grimms' *Cinderella* also had a grim ending where the eyes of the stepsisters were pecked by a bird, making them blind for the rest of their lives. These endings are very different to the ending of Cinderella that we know today where they all live happily ever after. *Little Red Riding Hood* tale had also undergone a number of changes. In the earliest version of *Little Red Riding Hood* known, the oral version, the little girl did wear a red robe (Dundes, 1989, p.19). It was Charles Perrault who provided the first written version of this tale, and had given her a red hood and named her Little Red Riding Hood. The historical/political interpretation of the tale saw the red hood as an honor to the French Revolution (Dundes, 1989, p. 100). Whatever the meaning of the red hood, it stays until today. However, the ending of the tale changed drastically over the centuries from the girl who died in the oral version, then the girl who was swallowed by the wolf in the Perrault version, and the rescued girl by a huntsman in the Grimm's version (Dundes, 1989, p. 73). These changes are to proof that reconstruction of a folktale is normal and necessary.

3. Theoretical Framework: Folktales Impact Society

With the objective of reconstructing a tale to reshape children and society, the following theoretical framework was developed:

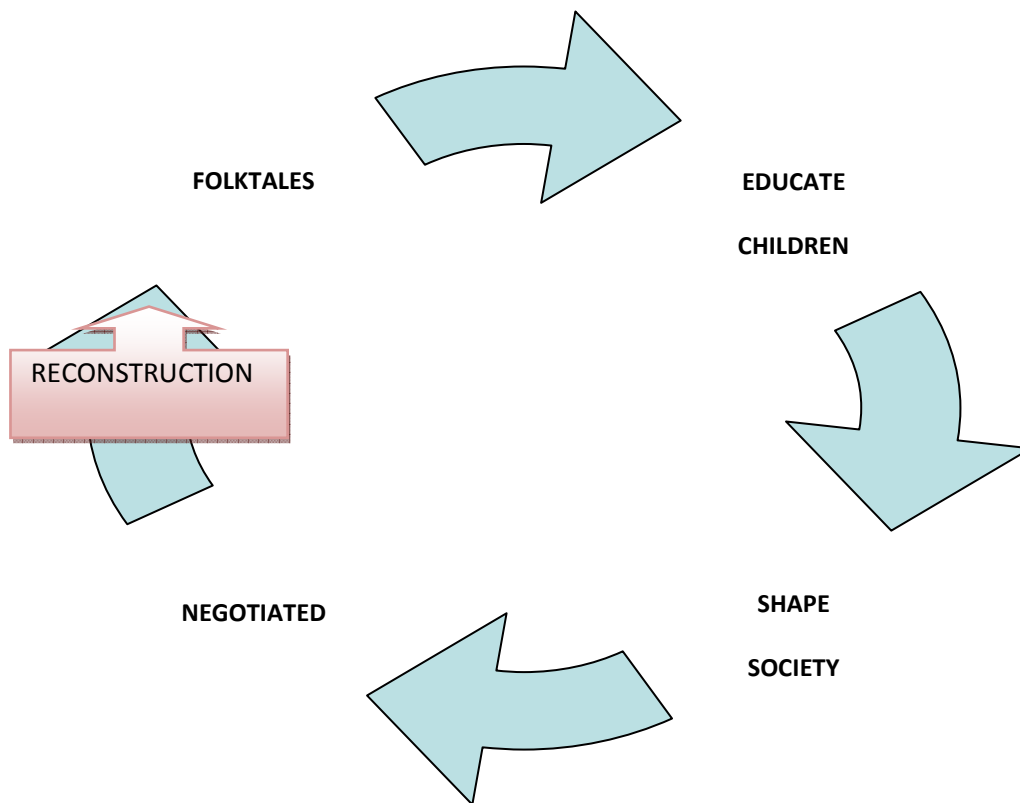


Figure 1: Reconstruction of Folktales

The above framework is adapted from Maurianne Adams' *Cycle of Socialization* (1997) where she argued that each and every one of us obtains systematic instructions on how we should be. We obtain this systematic instruction since early ages and it is received throughout our life. This is why social problems persist, according to Adams. The impact of folktales is present since the beginning of cycle, that reaffirmed Robbins' theory that because we have taken up the values in folktales so early in our lives, folktales seem to express our desires. To end the persisting social problems, a cut is necessary in the cycle. That is the reconstruction. The tale is deliberately reconstructed to cut the cycle of cursing in society. This is expected to correct the 'Cycle of Socialization' of Indonesian citizens. The reconstructed tale is hoped to educate children to a re-shaped values, away from the cursing attitude. As the children grow and join the society, the new value will be absorbed in society, and thus the values in society will be negotiated to a more forgiving one.

4. Methodology

Indonesian elementary school students aged 9 – 12 were the focus of this study. One hundred and fifty of them were recruited as respondents for this study, and were randomly divided into two groups: the control group and the experimental group. However, the responses from nine students were eliminated due to absences or not answering questions. The findings presented in this paper are from 141 respondents.

Both control group and experimental group were given pretest, treatment, and posttest. In the pretest, the respondents were given a number of designed situations and asked whether or not they will pardon the person/s. There are various situations involving people related to respondents at different levels, from parents, siblings, to total strangers. The situations are designed so that these people are at wrong with the respondents and that they either apologize or not to respondents. Given the circumstances, the respondents were asked whether or not they will forgive those people. A willingness to forgive will be identified as ‘positive’ response, while a non-willingness to forgive will be identified as ‘negative’ response.

During the treatment, the control group was being read to the traditional version of *Malin Kundang*. Emphasis was given to the unfilial duty that Malin Kundang failed to fulfill. The experimental group was being read to the reconstructed version of the tale. To eliminate bias, both versions are parallel in quality of pictures and printing.

In the posttest, the groups were again asked parallel questions on a designed situation similar to the ones they did in the pretest. The change in response is then measured – how much they change in terms of their willingness to forgive. The change from positive to negative responses, from negative to positive responses, and the unchanged responses are measured. The posttest is done one week after the treatment to minimize maturation and history that might affect the respondents in doing the posttest differently.

5. Finding & Discussion

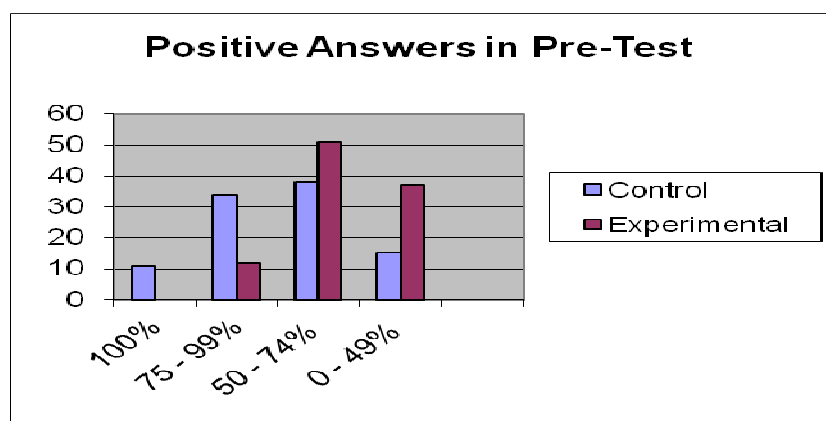


Chart 1: Positive Answers in Pretest

Chart 1 shows the percentage of positive responses during pretest in both groups. It is evident that the starting point of both groups’ willingness to forgive is not equivalent. The control group is generally more ‘positive’ if compared to the experimental group. 11% of the respondents from the control group were ready to forgive people in all circumstances, compared to 0% from the experimental group; and

only 15% of control group had 50% or more of negative responses, compared to 37% (more than double) of the respondents from the experimental group.

One week after the pretest, the respondents were each given a picture book of *Malin Kundang* tale, in traditional version for the control group and in reconstructed version in the experimental group. The respondents first read the tale on their own, and then a storyteller read the tale for them. In the control group, emphasis is given on the punishment for Malin, while in the experimental group, emphasis is given on the forgiveness to Malin.

After the treatment, the change between positive and negative responses is as follows:

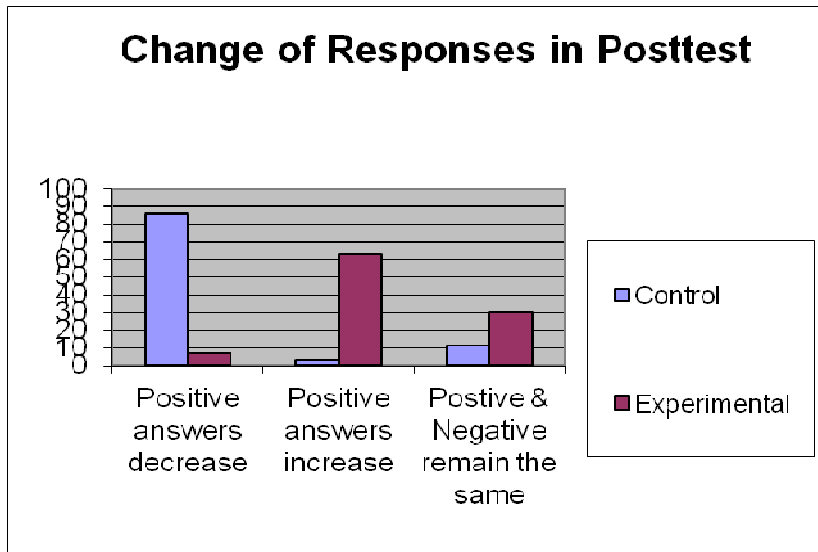


Chart 2: Change of Positive and Negative Responses in Posttest

Chart 2 shows how the responses change after the treatment. After being read again to *Malin Kundang* tale that emphasizes the unfilial behavior of Malin to his mother, almost all of the respondents in control group (86%) had a decrease in the number of positive responses. Only 11% of them had the same number of positive responses. This chart will further clarify how the changes in responses took place in the control group:

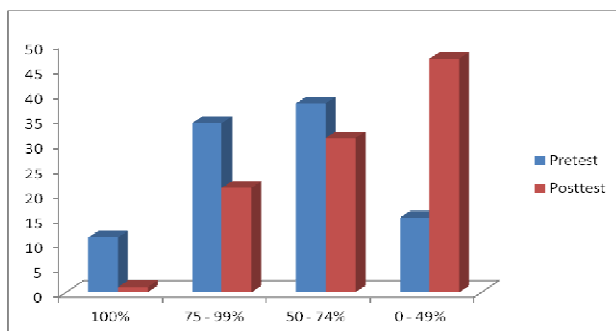


Chart 3: Change of responses in control group

On the other hand, the experimental group that was being read to the reconstructed version of the tale that emphasizes forgiveness had an increase (63%) in their positive responses. In general, there is an increase in their positive responses in the posttest. This will be more apparent from the following chart:

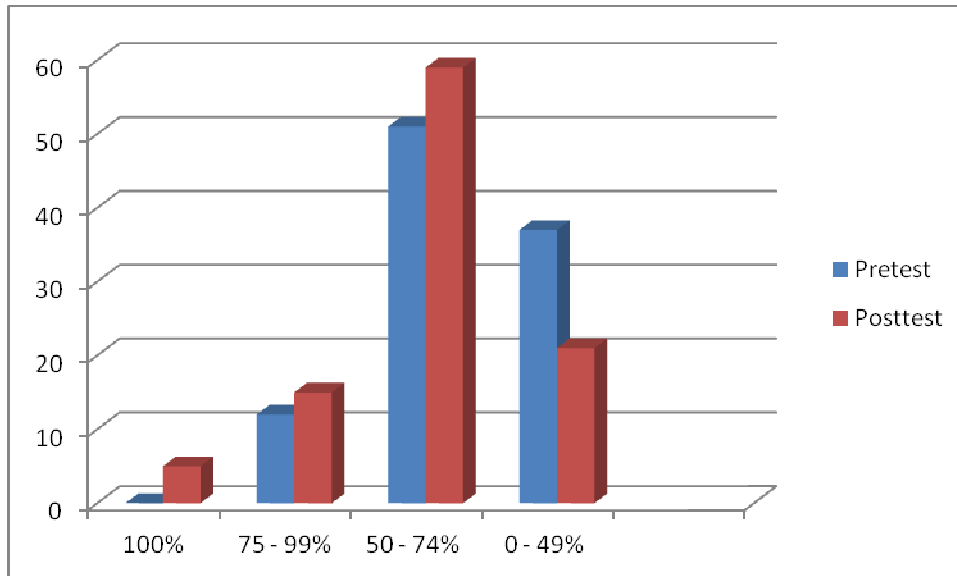


Chart 4: Change of responses in experimental group

It is evident that the experimental group had become more positive, or more willing to forgive. From 0% of respondents in experimental group who were willing to forgive in any circumstance, the number increased to 5%. The number of respondents who gave more than 50% negative responses also dropped from 37% to 21%. On the other hand, the control group who started out as the more positive group had become less positive in the posttest. The number of respondents who were ready to forgive in all circumstances dropped from 11% in the pretest to only 1% in the posttest.

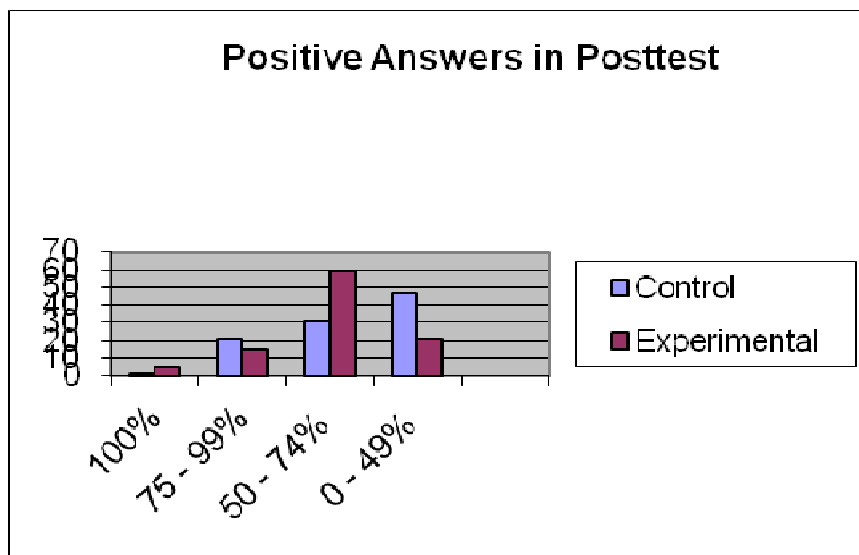


Chart 5: Positive Answers in Posttest

Chart 5 shows the positive responses of both groups in the posttest. The findings showed that reading the reconstructed version of *Malin Kundang* tale transformed respondents to be more positive, more

ready to forgive. The findings also showed that reading the traditional version of *Malin Kundang* tale reactivated the respondents' negative thinking and thus made them to be more negative and less ready to forgive.

6. Conclusion and Future Recommendation

The findings demonstrated a change of responses, from negative to positive, after reading the reconstructed version of *Malin Kundang*. It shows that reconstructing *Malin Kundang* hones positive attitude of respondents to people in their lives. However, habituation of reading the reconstructed version of the tale is necessary to see the result in longer term. It is therefore necessary to continue this research to wider respondents and to a longer time.

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