

Female Deities (Bidadari) in Indonesian Folklore: A Feminist Literary Critical Perspective

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Abstract—This study tries to examine the existence of female deity figures (bidadari) found in a number of folklores in Indonesia using the perspective of feminist literary criticism. Folklore which is the source of data is (1) Dewi Sri, (2) Dewi Nawang Wulan, and (3) Dewi Candika. The results showed that the female deity figures in Indonesian folklore are in accordance with the collective view of the past people with Hindu backgrounds who believed that there were other creatures besides humans who lived on earth, namely the spirits and the gods who came from heaven (sky palace) who had a relationship with human on earth. Physically and psychologically the female deity figures depicted in Indonesian folklore have perfect beauty and a high ability in intelligence and supernatural powers. They are believed to be able to carry out important tasks in life, such as fighting, carrying basic food sources, even protecting nature, such as the ocean and leading other creatures.

Keywords: *female deities, folklore, beauty, intelligence*

I. INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is a multicultural country with a variety of ethnic, cultural, linguistic and literary fields. In addition to recognizing national literature that uses Indonesian as a national language, each ethnic group also has folk literature, which initially uses local language media that are delivered orally. For the purpose of documenting and preserving the people's literary heritage of various ethnic groups in Indonesia, at this time folk literature from various ethnic groups in Indonesia has been retold in written form and published by the Language Board, Ministry of Education and Culture.

From the page <http://badanbahasa.kemdikbud.go.id>, the public can download and read various folktales published by the Language Board of Education and Culture.

Among the folk literature written and published, there are a number of stories that have a *bidadari* character. Bidadari is a demigod who is considered

more knowledgeable than humans [1]. In contrast to humans who live on earth, bidadari lived in heaven (palace of the sky), with the gods. Previous research conducted by Atisah [2] suggested that in a preliminary study conducted by the Language Board team in 2003 there were about 26 stories of *bidadari* from various ethnic groups in Indonesia, namely (1) "Malem Dewa", Folk Story from Aceh, Gayo, (2) "Putri Benu", Folk Story from Aceh, Gayo, (3) "Tupai Malimdewa", Folk Story from Aceh Selatan, (4) "Si Boru Leang Nagurasta", Folk Story from North Sumatra, Batak Toba, (5) "Mambang Linau", Folk Story from Riau, (6) "Sidang Belawan", Folk Story from Lampung, (7) "Sumur Tujuh", Folk Story from West Java, Banten, (8) "Jaka Tarub", Folk Story from Central Java, (9) "Aryo Menak Kawin dengan Bidadari", Folk Story from East Java, Madura, (10) "Tiga Piatu", Folk Story from Bali, (11) "Rajapala", Folk Story from Bali, (12) "Silang Gading", Folk Story from Central Kalimantan, (13) "Telaga Bidadari", Folk Story from South Sulawesi, (14) "Mamanua", Folk Story from North Sulawesi, Minahasa, (15) "Mamanua dan Wulansendow", Folk Story from North Sulawesi, Manado, (16) "Manusia Pertama di Kepulauan Talaud", Folk Story from North Sulawesi, Sangir Talaud, (17) "Gumansalangi", Folk Story from North Sulawesi, Sangir Talaud, (18) "Tula-Tulano Ratono Fitu Ghulu Bidhadari", Cerita Rakyat Daerah Sulawesi Tenggara, (19) "Oheo", Cerita Rakyat Daerah Folk Story from South-East Sulawesi, Kendari, (20) "Putri Satarina", Folk Story from South-East Sulawesi, Walio, (21) "Kacoq Parukiq", Folk Story from South-East Sulawesi, Mandar, (22) "Polo Padang", Folk Story from South-East Sulawesi, Toraja, (23) "Orang yang Memperistri Putri dari Kayangan", Folk Story from Central Sulawesi, (24) "Meraksamana dan Siraiman", Folk Story from West Papua, (25) "Putri Bungsu dari Danau", Folk Story from West Papua, "Wamena", (26) "Putri Kayangan", Folk Story from West Papua,

Ekagi. However, it turns out that not all the titles of the story have been thoroughly studied.

From the data it appears that almost all regions in Indonesia have folklore which have *bidadari* figures. That is, the majority of Indonesian people have the belief that there are living creatures called *bidadari* who live in heaven (sky palace) with the gods. This shows the influence of Hindu belief in Indonesia. In addition to believing in God Almighty, Hinduism also has two divine concepts namely Nirguna Brahman (God without form) called Brahman and Saguna Brahman (God in personal form) which is the basis of the Trimurti concept [3]. The belief in the god Trimurti is related to the three uses in the cosmic play in the creation, maintenance, and destruction and return of his creation to its origin), namely Vishnu symbolizes *sattavaguna*, Shiva symbolizes nature *tamas*, and Brahma stands between these two and symbolizes nature *rajas* [3]. In addition, also known as the goddess who is often referred to as *bidadari*, the wife (fairylike) of the gods [4]. One very famous goddess is Dewi Uma, who became the wife of Lord Shiva. Besides that, Dewi Ratih is also known as the wife of Dewa Kamajaya, who is a symbol and beauty reference for Javanese people.

The influence of Hinduism in folklore is also motivated by the existence of Hindu relics in Indonesia. from historical data found on several inscriptions in Java and *lontar-lontar* script in Bali which states that Sri Agastya spread Hinduism from India to Indonesia through the river Ganges, Yamuna, South India [5]. Hindu relics outside of Java are known by the existence of written evidence or ancient objects made in the 4th century AD, namely seven *Yupa* relics from the kingdom of Kutai in East Kalimantan. Of the seven *Yupa*, researchers obtained information about the religious emotion at that time stating that *Yupa* was established to commemorate and carry out *Yadnya* by Mulawarman. Other information states that king Mulawarman performed his *Yadnya* at a sacred place to worship the god Shiva, a place called Vaprakeswara [5].

This study limits the study of three *bidadari* figures found in three folklores, namely Dewi Sri, Dewi Nawang Wulan, and Dewi Candika. Dewi Sri (Dewi Sri and Sedana) is a *bidadari* who received orders from the gods in heaven to come down to earth by bringing rice seeds to overcome food shortages on earth. Dewi Nawang Wulan (Jaka Tarub and Nawang Wulan) is one of seven *bidadari* of heaven who often bathe in a lake on earth who is married to Jaka Tarub who stole Nawang Wulan's shawl, so she cannot return to heaven. Goddess Candika (Goddess Candika) is a *bidadari* created from the bursts of fire of the gods to gather the power of the gods in order to defeat the Mahisa Giant and his army that attacks the heaven.

This paper aims to examine the existence of figures in the form of *bidadari* found in a number of folklores in Indonesia using the perspective of feminist literary criticism. Feminist literary criticism is one type of literary study that utilizes the theoretical framework of feminism in interpreting and evaluating literary works. By using a theoretical framework of feminism, it is hoped that the experiences of women characters in literary works can be understood, which reflect reality, from the point of view of women [6]. Through feminist studies, it is also expected to reveal the possibility of patriarchal cultural forces that shape images of women and men, relations between them, or the existence of resistance to patriarchal domination reflected in these literary works [7,8].

II. RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative descriptive design to identify and understand the characters of *bidadari* figures found in Indonesian folklore. The source of the data is folklore written and published by the Language Development and Development Agency, Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia, which is downloaded from the page <http://badanahasa.kemdikbud.go.id>.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After careful reading and identification of the three *bidadari* figures in folklore which were the source of the data, it was found that physically the *bidadari* were imaged with beautiful faces, strong and brave appearances. In addition to Dewi Candika who remained in heaven and carried out the task of fighting against the Giant Mahisa and his army that attacked heaven, Dewi Sri and Nawangwulan were *bidadari* who came down to earth and met humans. Dewi Sri carried out the task of bringing rice seeds to Java, while Nawangwulan came down to earth with her six siblings to have fun bathing in a lake, then met and married humans. As creatures that come from heaven, the land of the gods, the relationship of the *bidadari* with human is not equal. In addition to being portrayed as having beauty that makes the earth people fall in love (Dewi Nawangwulan), *bidadari* also have intelligence and supernatural powers, so that they can help humans on earth.

In the Myth of Dewi Sri and Sedana [9] it is told that Dewi Sri and her brother, Sedana received an assignment from Batara Guru and Resi Narada to bring white and black rice seeds from the Jonggring Saloka Kahyangan to Java land [9].

Pada zaman dahulu di Tanah Jawa kekurangan bahan makanan. Kemudian, Batara Guru memanggil Resi Narada ke Kayangan Jonggring. Resi Narada ditugasi oleh Batara Guru untuk menurunkan benih padi ke Tanah Jawa. Dewi Sri dan Sedana diberi tugas membawa benih padi itu... [9].

From the quote it appears that the gods gave trust to Dewi Sri, together with her siblings to bring rice seeds from heaven to Java on earth. Their journey must pass through difficult places, up the mountain, down the cliff, and across the river. In carrying out their duties, they were disturbed by wild boar named Kala Srenggi. They succeeded in defeating Kala Srenggi, but before dying Kala Srenggi threatened to become a rice plant pest. Finally, Dewi Sri and Sedana gave Ki Senangke rice seeds and gave instructions on how to plant and care for them. The rice was planted in various regions by the grandchildren of Ki Semangke so that the Javanese people did not lack food [9].

As a *bidadari* sent by the gods from heaven to bring rice seeds to Java, it appears that Dewi Sri has a very big role for human survival on earth, especially in Java. From the name of the deity in the folklore, Batara Guru and Narada appear to be influenced by the story originating from the Mahabharata, one of the literary works which is one of the sources of Hindu religious teachings [10]. In the perspective of spiritual ecofeminism there is an analogy between the role of women in biological production with the archetypal role of "Motherland" or "Birth Mother," as the giver of life and creator of everything that exists [11,12].

In "Jaka Tarub and Nawang Wulan" [9] it is said that Nawangwulan is one of the seven *bidadari* of heaven who were bathing in a lake on earth. Unknown to the angels, Jaka Tarub who was hunting birds in the forest peered at the *bidadari* who were bathing. He then hid a pair of clothes belonging to Nawangwulan under a pile of rice in his barn. Nawangwulan eventually married Jaka Tarub and gave birth to a child named Nawangsih. After getting married to Nawangwulan, the rice in Jaka Tarub's granary was piling up and never lacked. Even though every day Nawangwulan cooked rice. Over time Jaka Tarub was curious, especially every time he cooked rice his wife always advised not to open the steamer used for cooking rice. Out of curiosity, Jaka Tarub violated his wife's ban, he opened the lid of the steamer and found that his wife only cooked one grain of rice each day. However, due to these actions Nawangwulan's ability to cook rice with one grain of rice was lost. Finally, the rice in the barn was getting thinner, so a pair of Nawangwulan clothes hidden in the barn were found. Using her *bidadari's* clothes, Nawangwulan returned to heaven. However, she could no longer be accepted as a citizen of heaven because she was considered to have become a human. Finally, Nawangwulan was told to stay in the South Sea as the ruler of the South Sea and held the title Nyi Roro Kidul [9].

From the story of Nawangwulan, it seems that her magic as *bidadari* was lost due to human intervention, Jaka Tarub. Nawangwulan cannot return to heaven without using her *bidadari's* clothes. Even after her *bidadari* clothes were rediscovered and returned to

heaven, she was rejected as a *bidadari* because she was considered to be a human, until finally she lived in the South Sea as Nyi Roro Kidul. Here we see a transformation in Nawangwulan, from a creature of heaven to a sea creature as Nyi Roro Kidul. The name Nyi Roro Kidul is the name used by the rulers of the South Sea before meeting and marrying Panembahan Senopati. After meeting and marrying Panembahan Senopati, her name changed to Nyo Ratu Kidul. After becoming Nyi Roro Kidul, Nawangwulan was transformed into a spirit, a jinn as told in the Babad Tanah Jawi [13]. As the ruler of the South Sea, Nyi Roro (Ratu) Kidul was portrayed as a stunning and beautiful princess who ruled all spirits on Java [13].

Dewi Candika [14] is a *bidadari* created from the flame that came out of the mouth of Lord Shiva, Lord Vishnu, and Lord Brama. The three gods created Dewi Candika to unite the forces of the *dewa* in order to be able to fight the giants who attacked the heaven led by Mahisa.

Setelah itu, para dewa memberi bekal kesaktian kepada Dewi Candika, Dewa Siwa memberi anugrah wajah bersinar, Dewa Brama mask ke rambut, dan Dewa Wisnu memberi kekuatan pada kepada dewi yang berparas cantik jelita itu. Melihat Dewa Siwa, Dewa Wisnu, dan Dewa Braha memberi kesaktian kepada Dewi Candika, dewa-dewa lainnya lalu mengikuti hal yang sama. Dewa Candra masuk ke dada, Dewa Brahma menyusup ke punggung, Dewa Wasu menempati telapak tangan, Dewa Kuwera bertengger di hidung, Dewa Wahyu tinggal di telinga.

Agar kekuatan Dewi Candika semakin nyata, para dewa Kahyangan Kadewatan kemudian memmberei senjata dan perlengkapan perang lainnya. Dewa Kresna memberi senjata Cakra. Dewa Agni menyerahkan tombak, Dewa Maruta memberi panah dan busur, Dewa Brahma memberi kendi berisi air, Dewa Prajapati memberi kalung, Dewa Wismakarma memberi kapak serta pakaian pengemis yang tidak tembus senjata, imawat meberi singa barong sebagai kendaraan [14].

With the union of the power of the gods in the figure of the Dewi Cadika, eventually the giants can be defeated. The figure of Dewi Candika was later enshrined in the form of a statue in Prambanan Temple and was named Lara Jonggrang, also known as Dewi Durgamahisasuramardhini and described as a goddess with as many as eight hands all carrying weapons, including a trident and chakra [14].

Why were the gods in heaven with their powers still unable to defeat the giants? Why did they have to create a goddess to unite their strengths? In his article entitled "Durgamahisa-suramardhini: Worship of Mother Goddess of All Time," I Wayang Redig [15] states that in Hindu mythology, Goddess Durga is the sacred (wife) of Lord Shiva. Sakti is seen as an active energy so that creation appears. The magic can act to fulfill the wishes of the devotees, meanwhile, the gods

as a magic pair, are considered passive and calm [15]. In this case Dewi Candika or Dewi Durgamahisa suramardhini represents Goddess, which is God imagined as having a female character, legitimizing the power of women, loving and independent [16].

From the perspective of feminist literary criticism, it appears that the three *bidadari* figures contained in the studied folklore show that they are constructed as super women, both physically, psychologically, and socially, especially in their relations with human beings and the giants. They are imaged as having perfect beauty and high quality in intelligence and supernatural powers. In relation to human beings on earth, they are present as a source of life and prosperity (Dewi Sri and Nawangwulan). In relation to the gods, she is present as a supernatural power (partner) that carries active energy, so as to be able to move and unite the power of the gods in defeating the enemy. The gender identities of *bidadari* who are equal to the gods and superior to men from the human race and the giants show that in the collective view of the society that gave birth to the folklore, influenced by Hinduism, women are not in a subordinate position. Women are believed to be able to carry out important tasks in life, such as fighting, carrying basic food sources, even protecting nature, such as the ocean and leading other creatures. Motive stories of ancestors who came from the sky found in a number of folklores in Indonesia according to Sunarti [17] is one form or effort to raise the honor of a tribe in traditional society. The stories of ancestors who came from heaven and then disappeared back to heaven after having children on earth, such as in "Jaka Tarub and Nawangwulan" and "Myth Nyi Rara Kidul" function to elevate the origins of the collective society of a tribe in a critical perspective feminist literature places a female figure in an honorable place.

IV. CONCLUSION

Based on research that has been conducted on three Indonesian folklore who have the character of an *bidadari*, it can be concluded that the figures contained in the Hindus folklore background, are the result of beliefs in the existence of gods and goddesses who live in heaven, a different world from the human world on earth. Physically and psychologically the *bidadari* depicted in Indonesian folklore are described as having perfect beauty and high ability in intelligence and supernatural powers. They are believed to be able to carry out important tasks in life, such as fighting, carrying basic food sources, even protecting nature, such as the ocean and leading other creatures.

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