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Ecofeminism Interpretations of Women's Transformation in Indonesian Folktales

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Abstract: *This study examines how Indonesian folktales present female characters transforming in response to social or cultural expectations. From an ecofeminist perspective, these narratives reflect deeper critiques of the intertwined marginalization of women and nature. Specifically, the study examines recurring motifs of female transformation into natural elements in three folktales: Nini dan Puteri Ikan, Asal Usul Kota Banyuwangi, and Legenda Ikan Patin. These stories portray women who, due to betrayal, grief, or societal pressure, undergo symbolic metamorphosis, particularly through transformations into fish or through symbolic fusion with water. The research employs a descriptive qualitative approach, applying thematic analysis with NVivo-style coding to identify patterns across texts. The analysis highlights three key themes: bodily transformation as a form of resistance or consequence, the weight of patriarchal expectations that restrict female agency, and spiritual or mystical symbolism that elevates the transformation beyond mere punishment. The findings suggest that these transformations function as both acts of protest and modes of renewal, expressing loss, liberation, and transcendence. Through this lens, the tales reveal cultural perspectives on women, morality, and human-nature relationships. Ultimately, the study contributes to gender and folklore scholarship by showing how narratives of female transformation encode socio-cultural anxieties and aspirations, offering alternative understandings of identity, power, and ecological interconnectedness.*

Keywords: *Ecofeminism; female characters; Indonesian folktales; nature symbolism; transformation*

Abstrak: Penelitian ini mengkaji representasi transformasi tokoh perempuan dalam cerita rakyat Indonesia sebagai respons terhadap tekanan sosial dan kultural. Dalam perspektif ekofeminisme, transformasi tersebut dipahami sebagai cerminan kritik terhadap keterkaitan antara peminggiran perempuan dan alam. Fokus penelitian diarahkan pada motif-motif berulang transformasi perempuan menjadi unsur alam dalam tiga cerita rakyat, yaitu *Nini dan Puteri Ikan*, *Asal Usul Kota Banyuwangi*, dan *Legenda Ikan Patin*. Ketiga cerita ini menampilkan perempuan yang, akibat pengkhianatan, kesedihan, atau tekanan sosial, mengalami metamorfosis simbolik, terutama melalui perubahan menjadi ikan atau peleburannya dengan air. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif dengan analisis tematik berbasis pengodean ala NVivo untuk mengidentifikasi pola lintas teks. Hasil analisis mengungkap tiga tema utama: transformasi tubuh sebagai bentuk respons atas penindasan, kuatnya ekspektasi patriarkal yang membatasi agensi perempuan, serta simbolisme spiritual dan kosmologis yang memberi makna transenden pada proses

transformasi tersebut. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa transformasi perempuan dalam cerita rakyat tidak semata berfungsi sebagai hukuman, melainkan juga sebagai bentuk resistensi simbolik dan mekanisme pembaruan ekologis. Melalui narasi ini, cerita rakyat mengungkapkan pandangan kultural tentang perempuan, moralitas, dan relasi manusia dengan alam. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada kajian gender dan folklor dengan menunjukkan bahwa transformasi perempuan menyandikan kecemasan dan aspirasi sosio-kultural, sekaligus menawarkan pemahaman alternatif tentang identitas, kuasa, dan keterhubungan ekologis.

Kata Kunci: *Cerita rakyat Indonesia; ekofeminisme; penokohan perempuan; simbolisme alam; transformasi*

Introduction

Folktales function as dynamic representations of culture, embodying the collective consciousness, values, and beliefs of the communities from which they emerge. In Indonesia, a nation of countless islands steeped in oral traditions, these stories often highlight the intricate connections between humanity and the natural world. Many of these folktales intricately incorporate socio-cultural themes, particularly those related to gender roles (Wan-Lau, 2020). Among them, three particular stories are noteworthy for their portrayal of female characters transforming into natural elements, opening up intriguing avenues for further exploration. This aspect highlights a persistent motif that effectively employs cultural symbols.

The stories discussed in this analysis have been documented in various literary anthologies, such as collections of Indonesian folktales. These folktales display patterns of people's perspectives on the meaning of femininity and nature, exploring the relationship between the two. The female transformation motif serves as the foundation for cultural narratives about women's roles, their relationship with the environment, and the imparting of moral lessons. However, can moral lessons be derived from narrative readings and overt interpretations? Transformations like this often represent more than just physical changes; they often symbolize more

profound, emotional shifts. Metaphorically, these stories convey themes of freedom, confinement, adaptation, and the intrinsic bond between women and nature. (Chamalah *et al.*, 2020)

Research by Berezkin (2023) on mythology in the boreal zone of Eurasia shows similar patterns in folktales. Natural elements, such as rivers or trees, are often associated with female deities or figures, as they are seen as essential to maintaining cosmic balance. These narratives highlight how transformation into natural elements can be understood as a symbolic erasure of women from social spaces and a form of devotion to their communities. From a cross-cultural analysis perspective, Čvorović and Coe (2022) suggest that these narratives maintain cultural values while facilitating our exploration of human connections with the environment.

Examining female transformation in Indonesian folktales aligns well with Zerar's (2020) findings. Stories of women transforming into natural elements often represent the relationship between women and nature, which is under male domination. In many Indonesian folktales, women experience forms of control or exploitation by men. However, in some cases, they also transform into beings with mystical powers that cannot be fully controlled. The ecofeminist approach facilitates a deeper analysis of how these narratives reflect the symbolic struggle

between men and women in determining meaning and power over women's bodies and the natural world. Angelopoulos' (2024) exploration of the dialogue between folktales and psychoanalysis, including the central themes inherited in oral traditions, reveals that folktales are more than just entertainment. They have essential symbolic meanings that help us understand our identities and the complex fabric of social relationships (Trang, 2025).

Several studies on folktales can strengthen this exploration by examining how the transformation of women into natural elements in various versions of world folktales can be interpreted as an expression of society's collective unconscious regarding the relationship between women and nature. As in Greek folktales, which reflect psychological and cultural tensions, the tale of the woman-fish in Indonesia also represents the tension between patriarchal domination and female resistance in traditional societies (Vassilkov, 2023).

Folktales are interpreted as a form of cultural expression and a tool for understanding broader psychological and social dynamics. Research on texts published by H. von Wlislocki in the late 19th century also offers an intriguing perspective on understanding the relationship between folktales, the construction of cultural identity, and mythological heritage. In analyzing two myths and one folktale from Wlislocki's collection, parallels were found with Indian mythology, not in Sanskrit literature as assumed by Wlislocki, but in the mythology of Indian tribes. This finding suggests that the relationship between folklore, mythology, and cultural identity often transcends geographical and ethnic

boundaries. This means that folktales with female characters usually represent not only the subordination of women but also an expression of resistance and negotiation against patriarchal social structures, as seen in various folk traditions worldwide.

Speaking of the representation of women's subordination, one fascinating theme is the pattern of female transformation in Indonesian folktales. The tale "*Nini dan Puteri Ikan*" from Southeast Sulawesi tells of a princess cursed to become a fish who can return to being human through a prince's true love. Such stories reflect the symbolic relationship between women and nature, showing how women often become the focal point of conflict, transformation, and salvation narratives. In the context of ecofeminism, the relationship between women and nature is usually seen as a reflection of the double exploitation imposed by the patriarchal system on both (Sumartini *et al.*, 2023).

Ecofeminists like Françoise (2018) emphasize that women and nature are often treated as objects to be controlled and exploited by patriarchal societies. This is particularly relevant in Indonesian folktales, where women are often depicted as guardians of harmony with nature or as victims of social injustices related to environmental issues. As discussed in mythology analysis, the transformation motif in folktales often reflects the symbolic struggle between dominant forces and women's efforts to maintain their autonomy (Horvath, 2020). In many of these transformative narratives, a woman's body is not just a symbol to be controlled but also a site of resistance against the social systems that limit their freedom (Hubbard, 2023). A similar pattern can be

observed in folktales that link shape-changing with the tension between the balance of nature and human dominance over it, as discussed in the context of animal mythology (Henderson, 2020).

Folktales frequently mirror the socio-cultural dynamics of the societies that produce them, including human–nature relationships and the gender roles embedded within social norms. In the Indonesian context, stories featuring the transformation of women into natural elements, such as a fish in *Legenda Ikan Patin* or tears that become a river in *Asal Usul Kota Banyuwangi*, do more than depict physical change; they articulate layered symbolic meanings. These narratives reveal cultural perceptions of femininity and highlight the enduring connection between women and the natural world. Examining these stories helps illuminate how this connection is constructed within the realm of folktales. Linguistically, the relationship emerges through the symbols, diction, and narrative structures that shape the portrayal of female characters.

Additionally, these narratives often serve as a vehicle for conveying moral messages and cultural values. The motif of transformation is frequently symbolically used to illustrate freedom, connection, adaptation, and the intrinsic relationship between women and the natural world. In many cultures, such folktales also reflect broader social conflicts where women become the point of intersection between nature and the social norms that shape gender roles. As explained by Movahedi and Moshtagh (2019), folktales not only reflect cultural struggles related to gender and sexuality but also open spaces for

discussions about identity and resistance against existing social structures.

Vassilkov (2023) demonstrated, through oral stories of European and Indian tribes, that changes in folklore reflect shifts in social structure or cultural identity, not just physical transformations. These findings offer a new perspective for individuals familiar with the intricacies of folklore. This idea aligns with Stephens (2009), who concluded that folklore is an important means of capturing and passing on social values from one generation to the next. This idea aligns with him, who concluded that folklore is an important means of capturing and passing on social values from generation to generation. When discussing ecofeminism, stories about women in folklore who transform into natural elements illustrate an attempt to interpret the same “function” between women, society, and the environment. Nature is considered part of their life dynamics and a resource that needs to be managed. As time has evolved, folktales no longer solely function as entertainment or vehicles for moral values. However, they also reflect the social, cultural, and worldview systems of the societies from which they originate. In the context of Indonesian folktales, these stories carry narratives that shape and reproduce views on women and nature.

These stories serve as a symbol that women's bodies and nature are often depicted as subordinate. This is also interpreted in terms of their relationship in a patriarchal perspective. Rather than celebrating women's roles, some stories present narrative patterns that require women to change, disappear, or merge into nature to meet social expectations or as a punishment for disobedience. This

phenomenon aligns with ecofeminist critiques Carroll and Tolan (2023), which state that the exploitation of nature and women stems from the same patriarchal power structures; both are seen as “the other” that must be controlled, subdued, and utilized. This aligns with the view that in many folktales, women are often positioned as subjects that must transform or even disappear to meet societal expectations.

As noted by El-Shamy (2021), the motif of transformation in folktales often reflects tension between social norms that demand conformity and resistance to them. Furthermore, Deeks (2020) reveals how stories in certain cultures demonstrate the close connection between women and the exploitation of nature, where both women and nature are often viewed as entities to be controlled in order to maintain social and environmental balance. According to Gogiashvili (2021), similar motifs in global mythology suggest that women and nature are frequently depicted as entities that must undergo physical or symbolic transformation to regain their place in society or fulfill their duties.

One of the datasets in this study is derived from the folktale *Nini dan Puteri Ikan*. In this folktale, the female character loses her human form and can only regain it if a man chooses to take on her life. From a mythological and narrative analysis perspective, this motif reveals that women in folktales are often portrayed as subjects who must meet standards or expectations set by men to gain freedom or reacceptance in society. Kirk (2023) explains in his study of the function of myths that many mythological narratives depict women as entities that can only have value if they meet the criteria determined by patriarchal

systems. According to Merolla and Schipper (2009), myths and folktales serve as cultural reflections and instruments for understanding social power dynamics. Women are frequently compelled to conform to predetermined roles.

In *Asal Usul Kota Banyuwangi*, the female character is depicted as an object of suspicion simply because of her beauty, which places her in a limited and risky position. She had to sacrifice herself by throwing herself into the river, proving her identity and purity. The stereotype projected by her husband, who believes her beauty may mean she is not human but a supernatural being, reflects a misogynistic narrative that frequently emerges in folktales, where women's bodies are linked with fear and mystification. This narrative illustrates how women are often viewed as entities that must continually prove their worth and existence in ways approved by social norms or even as sacrifices for acceptance. As Chen et al. (2024) explain, such stories often show how female characters are shaped within frameworks constrained by societal views on their roles.

By placing women in situations where they must sacrifice themselves or prove something that should already be clear, these stories portray transformations that are not only physical but also symbolic, binding women's bodies to obligations and fears inseparable from patriarchal views. A similar event occurs in *Legenda Ikan Patin* when Dayang Kumunah is punished for violating a spiritual rule not imposed on men. Consequently, she must return to the river and transform into a fish. Her body, formerly human, becomes part of the natural ecosystem but symbolically disappears from the social space as a female individual. This reflects a form of erasure

of women's existence due to disobedience to unjust norms. This transformation is not just a physical disappearance but also a symbol of women's marginalization in societies that often treat women as entities that must submit to rules made by more extraordinary powers, which in this case are the patriarchal system and unequal spiritual structures. Santucci et al. (2020) note that numerous folktales demonstrate that transgressions of social or spiritual rules frequently result in metamorphosis or erasure, reflecting the influence of gender roles. Further analysis by Duarte and Macquarrie (2021) suggests that stories depicting transformation often reflect how social norms regulate women's existence, leading to the erasure of their identities and the exclusion of their spaces within the broader society.

These three stories present a consistent pattern: when women fail to meet societal expectations or norms, they are “erased” or “transformed” into passive yet symbolically functional elements of nature. This illustrates how women and nature are placed in instrumental relationships, praised when they conform, erased when they resist. As a result, Duarte and Macquarrie (2021) are critical because they expose how folktales contribute to the perpetuation of patriarchal hierarchies by depicting women as subservient, passive aspects of nature who are ready to be sacrificed, and highlight an ecofeminist approach. This critical perspective emphasizes the connection between women's oppression and environmental exploitation. This theory posits that patriarchal systems view women and nature as entities to be exploited, controlled, and subordinated for the benefit of male or dominant societal power. In the

context of Indonesian folktales, narratives about the transformation of women into elements of nature (fish, water, or rivers) become a symbolic representation of this subordination. Women who are deemed to have failed to meet social expectations or who violate norms are narratively depicted as deserving to be “erased” from human social structures through transformation into nature. Narratives about women in Southeast Asian literature and popular culture often conflict with cultural symbolism and social representation. Women's bodies and identities are produced in many texts using patriarchal perspectives that institutionalize obedience, sacrifice, and submission as vital female qualities. Such depictions reflect culture and function as ideological tools to maintain the power imbalance between women and the natural world.

Several previous studies have attempted to explore this dimension. Hông (2022), in his study of Hemingway and Bảo Ninh's works, discusses how women's voices are marginalized in male-dominated narrative structures. However, these studies have not fully addressed how women's bodies are not only silenced verbally but also symbolically merged into nature or erased from social spaces, as seen in traditional narratives like Indonesian folktales. Lan (2019) also writes about women, revealing how patriarchal ideas influence the ideal image of women in the social order. However, this paradigm portrays women as passive victims of ideological frameworks. In Indonesian folktales, such as *Nini dan Puteri Ikan* and *Legenda Ikan Patin*, women are not only subject to rules. However, they are positioned as entities that must be “transformed” to align with social order. In

other words, it is about submission and the erasure of women's human existence, later replaced by symbolic roles that portray them as part of nature, such as fish, water, or landscapes.

Meanwhile, Trang (2025) interprets supernatural femininity in her study of female ghost figures in Southeast Asian popular culture as a mode of symbolic resistance to patriarchal norms. However, such interpretations remain largely absent from analyses of Indonesian folktales. Existing studies seldom consider whether transformations of female characters function as resistance or subversion, instead, these narratives are often treated as cultural expressions of moral instruction or mythic symbolism. What remains insufficiently explored is how these transformations operate as mechanisms that reinforce patriarchal expectations rather than challenge them.

To address this gap, the present study offers an ecofeminist reading that foregrounds the structural connection between women's bodies and nature as mutually regulated and exploited domains. Unlike previous research that emphasizes female agency, voice, or social negotiation within mystical forms, this study demonstrates that transformations in Indonesian folktales typically legitimize the notion that women who violate social or spiritual norms should be "returned" to nature. These narratives do not merely depict women as victims of patriarchal control; they normalize the idea that female bodies can be altered, sacrificed, or absorbed into natural forms as a corrective measure.

By introducing the concept of patriarchal sublimation, this study proposes that Indonesian folktales

symbolically convert women into natural entities not to celebrate empowerment or spiritual transcendence, but to render them into forms that are socially acceptable, controllable, and ideologically useful within a patriarchal worldview. This perspective fills an important research gap by reframing female transformations not as resistance or tragedy alone, but as a culturally sanctioned strategy for disciplining femininity through spiritual and ecological symbolism.

The three folktales analyzed, *Nini dan Puteri Ikan*, *Asal Usul Kota Banyuwangi*, and *Legenda Ikan Patin*, present similar patterns: (1) women face social or spiritual pressure; (2) women make sacrifices or undergo transformations; (3) these transformations turn women into part of nature; and (4) this transformation is accepted as a logical consequence of the "error" or disobedience of women.

Indonesian folktales not only show women as victims of patriarchy but also support the idea that when women deviate from society's standards, their bodies should be changed, sacrificed, and merged with nature. Phenomena in this study not only complement previous research but also offer a new narrative: that in Indonesian folktales, a symbolic mechanism exists where women are sublimated into nature, not to be preserved as myths of empowerment, but to be controlled in forms that are "useful" and "acceptable" to patriarchal society. Grounded in ecofeminist theory, this study examines the symbolic transformation of women in three Indonesian folktales: *Nini dan Puteri Ikan*, *Asal Usul Kota Banyuwangi*, and *Legenda Ikan Patin*, to explore how female identity, agency, and

embodiment are narratively constructed, negotiated, or erased.

Although previous research has examined female transformations in various global folktales and explored ecofeminist themes in Indonesian folktales, few have specifically analyzed how symbolic metamorphosis constructs the relationship between femininity and nature in Indonesian folktales. Existing studies often highlight the subordination or moral punishment of women but rarely address how magical or spiritual transformations alter, erase, or renegotiate women's identities. Furthermore, little attention has been paid to how these transformations encode patriarchal double standards, particularly through spiritual or supernatural mechanisms that regulate women's roles.

To address this issue, this study focuses on three key questions: (1) How do Indonesian folktales construct the relationship between femininity and nature through symbolic transformation narratives? (2) In what ways are female characters' identities erased or redefined through magical or spiritual transformations in Indonesian folktales? and (3) how do these narratives reflect patriarchal double standards through spiritual control over female roles?

To investigate these questions, the study employs a qualitative research design using NVivo-style thematic coding and visual mapping to identify recurring narrative patterns. The analytical focus is on themes such as bodily transformation, gendered symbolism, patriarchal expectations, and spiritual constraints. By interpreting transformation not only as a plot device but also as a cultural metaphor, this research positions

folktales as ideological texts that encode the symbolic tension between subjugation and resistance, both for women and for nature. Through this approach, the study contributes to contemporary debates in ecofeminism, folklore studies, and the representation of gender in traditional narratives.

Methods

(Tarnoki & Puentes, 2019) employed a descriptive qualitative approach, applied through contextual literary analysis to interpret symbolic patterns, character constructions, and narrative functions in Indonesian folktales. This design enabled an in-depth exploration of the underlying socio-cultural ideologies and symbolic representations related to gender and nature. The primary analytical lens was ecofeminism, which emphasizes the interconnection between the subordination of women and environmental exploitation (D'eaubonne, 2018). This perspective guided the interpretive analysis of how folktales construct women's identities, transformation, and erasure within patriarchal cultural narratives.

The primary data sources consisted of three purposively selected Indonesian folktales: *Nini dan Puteri Ikan* (Southeast Sulawesi), *Asal Usul Kota Banyuwangi* (East Java), and *Legenda Ikan Patin* (South Kalimantan). All texts were analyzed in Bahasa Indonesia versions, as published in contemporary folktale compilations, rather than in local-language originals or translated adaptations. These stories were selected due to their portrayal of female transformation into natural elements (e.g., fish, water, river) and their cultural prominence. The unit of analysis included narrative components such as

character transformations, recurring motifs, and symbolic representations of gender nature relations.

Type of Research and Data Source: This is a qualitative literary study, drawing on primary data (textual sources of folktales) and secondary data (folklore anthologies, scholarly literature on gender and folklore, and ecofeminist theoretical texts). The integration of both data types supported a layered interpretation of each narrative.

While the study does not involve human participants in the traditional empirical sense, peer debriefing was conducted with fellow academic scholars to validate coding categories and thematic interpretations, simulating an interpretive participant validation process.

Data were collected through literary documentation techniques, including intensive reading, annotation, and systematic note-taking to capture recurring motifs and symbolic constructions. These steps helped identify how each folktale articulates the intersection of gender roles, ecological imagery, and transformation. Additional sources, such as academic journals, book chapters, and digital folklore repositories, were consulted to contextualize the primary data (Marinas, 2025)

The study applied thematic analysis, adapted from Harvilahti's (2022) six-phase framework. The phases included: (1) *Familiarization* through repeated readings of texts, (2) *Initial coding* of narrative elements related to bodily change, power dynamics, and spiritual symbolism, (3) *Theme generation* (e.g., “sacrifice and social legitimacy,” “nature as feminine space”), (4) *Theme review* for coherence and representativeness, (5) *Theme*

definition and refinement (e.g., “spiritual imprisonment,” “erased through magic”), and (6) *Interpretive synthesis* to construct a theoretical narrative connecting empirical patterns to ecofeminist concepts.

To enhance analytical rigor, NVivo software was employed to support the code-and-retrieve process and facilitate thematic visualization. The full texts of the folktales were imported into NVivo and systematically coded at nodes representing key concepts such as *transformation due to betrayal*, *spiritual erasure*, and *nature-bound femininity*. The software's tools for code co-occurrence, query mapping, and cluster analysis enabled the researcher to identify interconnections between themes and examine the distribution of symbolic motifs across stories. Furthermore, NVivo's coding stripes and tree map functions allowed for the creation of visual representations that enhanced interpretive depth and thematic clarity. This digital method not only streamlined the analysis but also increased the transparency, consistency, and reproducibility of the findings.

(f) Data Validity:

To ensure credibility and trustworthiness, the study employed intra-coder reliability through iterative re-coding across multiple sessions. In addition, peer debriefing with academic colleagues helped validate interpretations and reduce subjectivity. Coding results were reviewed and cross-compared to strengthen thematic consistency and interpretive depth.

Result and Discussion

Gender-Naturalism Narrative Mapping

The findings shed light on how Indonesian folktales construct the

relationship between femininity and nature through symbolic transformation narratives. The coding results reveal that this connection operates beyond mere storytelling aesthetics, functioning instead as an ideological structure that shapes cultural understandings of women's roles. Recurrent motifs of women transforming into fish, water, or other natural forms suggest that femininity is inherently linked to the natural world, yet also rendered vulnerable to erasure, sacrifice, or dissolution. These patterns demonstrate that transformation serves as a symbolic vehicle for conveying cultural expectations surrounding purity, emotional endurance, and the association of women with domestic and ecological domains.

The representation of women in Indonesian folktales is examined through an ecofeminist lens. One strength of this approach is its ability to trace ideological influences within narratives, particularly regarding the relationship between women's bodies and nature. To support a more systematic and in-depth reading, data analysis was conducted using NVivo software, allowing for thematic coding and visual mapping of themes in a structured manner. Using narrative-based thematic coding, we conducted an in-depth analysis of each folktale excerpt to reveal underlying patterns in the plot, character descriptions, and the interactions between female

characters and their environments. The results of this analysis were then visualized as a heatmap.

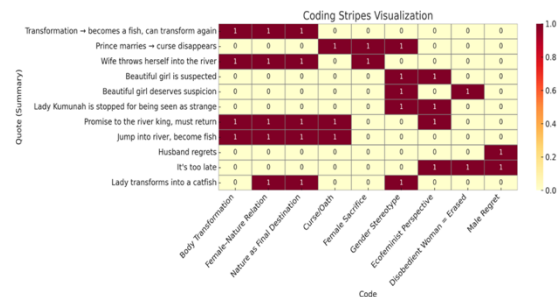


Figure 1 Coding Stripes Visualization

The visualization of coding stripes shown in Figure 1 illustrates how the excerpts in the folktales relate to thematic codes such as body transformation, female-nature relations, curses or promises, female sacrifice, and male regret. Through these graphics, it is evident that some excerpts encompass more than one theme, reflecting the complexity of the narratives and the depth of symbolic meaning in the tales of female transformations into water beings (such as fish or river creatures). From the visualization, the themes of Body Transformation and the Female-Nature Relation consistently emerge in excerpts such as “Transformation → becomes a fish, can transform again,” “Wife throws herself into the river,” and “Jump into the river, become fish.” These codes reinforce the findings of the theme mapping as follows:

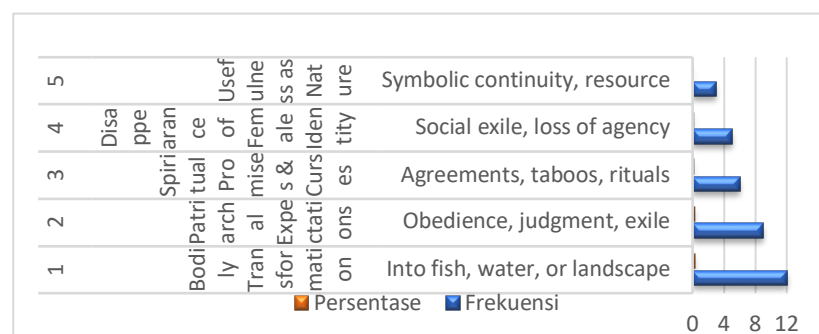


Figure 2 Coding Stripes Analysis

This mapping presents frequency statistics and is an entry point for exploring ideological and structural meanings. Narratives in folktales are never neutral. They carry cultural biases that are reproduced across generations, often perpetuating power imbalances between men and women, as well as between humans and the natural world. While these themes differ in form and focus, they share a common thread: women's bodies are represented not as autonomous subjects but as entities that must conform, transform, or even disappear to meet external expectations, whether from social systems or spiritual belief structures. In the context of ecofeminism, this highlights a parallel between the exploitation of nature and the exploitation of women's bodies. Both are positioned as “others” to be controlled, dominated, or given meaning from an external source.

The results of this thematic visualization not only reveal narrative patterns in folktales but also indicate how language and discourse structures shape societal perceptions of women's bodies. As shown by Rauf et al. (2025) in their linguistic study of the Wandiu-diu narrative, women's bodies are often reproduced through subordinating and symbolic diction, reinforcing discourses of powerlessness and a lack of autonomy. In the Indonesian folktales analyzed, a similar motif is observed through the representation of women as cursed beings, who are tested and ultimately transformed into passive elements of the natural landscape. The importance of understanding folktales as a medium for shaping collective consciousness is also emphasized by Rubab et al. (2025), who highlight how knowledge about women's

rights, including inheritance rights in Southern Pakistan, is formed through manufactured consent or engineered social agreement. They contend that inequality emerges not just from ignorance but also from the internalization of cultural narratives that are perpetually reinforced by traditional stories.

This becomes even more complex when considering local cultural dynamics, as Hayati et al. (2024) explored in the Minangkabau *kaba* narrative. In traditional and modern texts, gender roles in *kaba* have shifted, but most still show male dominance in leadership and decision-making structures. Their study shows that even in matrilineal societies, women are still often constructed as symbols, rather than as primary agents. This parallels the findings of this research, where the transformation of women's bodies into nature reinforces the representation of women as the “symbolic backdrop” for social orders dominated by men. In the same regional context, Indonesian folktales such as *Keke Panagian* from Minahasa, examined by Iroth and Tatipang (2025), demonstrate how the construction of women as the moral guardians of the family relies on passive narratives where women are merely value-keepers, not agents of change. Indonesian folktales generally position women in symbolic roles that value them not for their agency, but rather as moral, spiritual, or cultural intermediaries. This is seen in the theme “Usefulness as Nature,” which only emerges once women no longer have a human form or control over their lives.

The “Worthy” Transformation of Women’s Bodies

The findings help clarify how female characters’ identities are erased or redefined through magical or spiritual transformations in Indonesian folktales. The coded data reveal that these transformations function as mechanisms of symbolic violence, in which women who are considered disobedient, imperfect, or socially transgressive are removed from the human realm and reassigned to the domain of nature. In *Nini dan Puteri Ikan*, for example, the protagonist’s ability to regain her human form depends entirely on male recognition, positioning the female body as a site of negotiation between curse and social acceptance, yet ultimately controlled by male authority.

Behind the magical transformations in these narratives lies symbolic violence against women's bodies that are disobedient or “imperfect” must be erased from the human order and merged into nature. This transformation in Indonesian folktales, such as *Nini dan Puteri Ikan*, illustrates that a woman can only regain her human form if a man accepts her as such. The woman's body becomes the mediator between the curse and social acceptance. Unfortunately, both remain under male control. The most dominant theme is “Bodily Transformation,” appearing in 34% of the occurrences. This theme shows how the female characters transform into fish, water, or other elements of nature. These transformations are physical and symbolic, representing the loss of human identity and the entry of women into passive natural structures. This is evident in both *Nini dan Puteri Ikan* and *Legenda Ikan Patin*, where the female characters lose their human form due to violating norms or spiritual

promises. The female characters transform into natural elements. This can be seen in an excerpt from *Nini dan Puteri Ikan*:

“Konon, jika seorang pangeran menikahiku dalam kondisi seperti ini, kutukan itu akan terangkat.” (K. Dian, 2024, p. 289)

This transformation is not just a form of magic or a curse but a symbol of how women's bodies are conditioned to submit to male expectations. In *Legenda Ikan Patin*, a similar situation occurs:

“Aku tidak diperbolehkan menunjukkan insangku kepada siapa pun. Jika aku melakukannya, aku harus kembali ke sungai.” (K. Dian, 2024, p. 59)

After saying this, Dayang Kumunah jumps into the river. Her body then transforms into a beautiful fish. Such phenomena correspond with broader narrative patterns in Southeast Asian folklore. In his study of reptile-twin myths in Southeast Asia, Ermacora (2023) shows how the transformation of humans into animals is often culturally charged, reflecting local value systems about hierarchy, taboos, and social reproduction. The transformation of women into natural entities in this context can be read as a form of “re-mapping” the body into a morally controlled patriarchal structure.

Meanwhile, Cardi (2022), in his analysis of animal tricksters in Japanese folklore and Angela Carter's works, shows that when women are associated with animals or natural symbols, such narratives often reinforce women's separation from human agency. Rather than representing freedom, the association with animals and

nature often traps women in constructions as “the other”, who must be tamed or regulated. This is relevant to the transformation of Dayang Kumunah, who, after becoming a fish, is remembered not as an individual but as part of the natural resource that holds symbolic and economic value for the community.

Women Are Required to Conform or Disappear

The findings offer a clearer understanding of how these narratives reveal patriarchal double standards embedded within spiritual frameworks that monitor, judge, and ultimately regulate women’s roles, an issue at the core of question 3. Findings from various Indonesian folktales show that patriarchal expectations of women are not only present as cultural backdrops but also manifest as systematic mechanisms that test their values, morality, and even their existence. This is evident in the thematic data, which shows that Patriarchal Expectations account for 25% of the findings. This theme highlights how women are represented as objects who must undergo various forms of suffering or moral proving in order to gain social validation that almost always comes from men or masculine power structures. A concrete example can be found in *Asal Usul Kota Banyuwangi*, where a woman is portrayed as a mysterious figure simply because of her physical appearance. The accusations that arise are not just subtle remarks but reflect a cultural fear of a woman’s body being considered too beautiful to be truthful:

“Hah? Seorang gadis cantik? Apakah dia manusia? Mungkin dia adalah hantu penunggu

hutan?” (Wijayanti, 2023, p. 14)

Rather than being respected, the beauty of the female character sparks suspicion. She is then forced into an extreme action, throwing herself into the river to prove her loyalty to her husband. This clarifies that belief in the woman's character in this narrative is not easily granted; it must be redeemed through physical suffering and self-sacrifice. This type of narrative is not exclusive to Indonesian folklore; it is also found in other cultures. In global studies of folktales, similar patterns repeatedly emerge. (Marinas, 2025) highlights how women in Russian folktales often have no choice but to surrender their bodies and souls as a form of moral proof for men. Similarly, Imposti (2023) in his study of *Snezhimochka* demonstrates that female characters, even when spiritually or symbolically strong, are still constrained by the moral boundaries imposed by a male-dominated world.

Zerar (2020), through his research on Kabyle myths, illustrates how the fear of female agency is often materialized through female monster figures. In the Indonesian context, the mystification of beautiful women as “forest spirits” symbolizes the domestication of women who are perceived as being too free, beautiful, or independent. This stereotype is not just part of the story. However, it also mirrors a social system that consistently places women between the human and the mythic, between being trusted and being suspected. These tales demonstrate that societal expectations of women are prevalent in the home and social environment, and are perpetuated and reinforced through cultural heritage, such as fairy tales. Whether curses, doubts, or

myths, these form subconscious structures that influence how society views women (Chronister, 2020). By comparing them to cross-cultural contexts, we can see that the mechanisms of silencing and erasing women's agency are global phenomena packaged in various local forms.

The theme of *Spiritual Promises and Curses* (17%) in Indonesian fairy tales describes the existence of sacred rules that bind women morally and spiritually. Many stories depict mysterious contracts, spiritual promises, or sacred prohibitions that women must fulfill; if they fail to do so, they will be punished. In *Asal Usul Ikan Patin*, for example, Dayang Kumunah is bound by a promise that explicitly applies only to her:

“Aku telah berjanji kepada raja penghuni sungai untuk tidak tertawa. Aku tidak diperbolehkan menunjukkan insangku kepada siapa pun.” (K. Dian, 2024, p. 59)

When she breaks this vow, she not only loses her human form but is also erased from the social world as an individual. Her body's transformation into a fish is not merely the effect of magic or a curse. However, it symbolizes how women who fail to meet moral or spiritual standards are “returned” to nature, characterized by silence, passivity, and the absence of social voice. 17% percent of the data in this study reflects a similar narrative pattern: spiritual promises, taboos, or curses specifically burdening female characters. No male character is assigned the same moral responsibility. These rules depict how myths are used to legitimize control over women's bodies and behavior,

often under the guise of obedience or sanctity.

This type of narrative shares structural similarities with the *Legend of the White Snake* from China, as critically re-examined by Wang (2020). In his article, Wang analyzes how *The Legend of the White Snake* traditionally positions female characters in a state of subjection to spiritual and moral laws defined by a patriarchal society. The White Snake, although depicted as a powerful and magical figure, remains confined by prohibitions that ultimately lead to her tragedy. Wang highlights how feminist revisions of the legend attempt to unravel this moral logic by questioning why the spiritual burden always falls on women's bodies. Suppose the *Legend of the White Snake* highlights the boundary between power and curse in the body of a mystical woman. In that case, *Legenda Ikan Patin* places women at the intersection of beauty and prohibition, where their bodies are socially and spiritually constrained. Like the White Snake, who is punished for crossing gender roles defined by society, Dayang Kumunah is punished for violating boundaries set by male authority (the river king), and her presence in the human world is no longer permitted.

In these stories, women undergo transformations, losing their ability to speak, make choices, or fully exist as individuals. They become symbolic figures without a voice, remembered only as myths or legends. Fourteen percent of the data indicates that female characters are losing their existence as social subjects. After changing form or making sacrifices, they no longer have a voice or agency. For example, in *Legenda Ikan Patin*:

“Awangku Usop menyesali perbuatannya. Dia tidak menyangka akan kehilangan istrinya. Namun, semuanya sudah terlambat.” (K. Dian, 2024, p. 59)

After throwing herself into the river, Dayang Kumunah never returns as a human. She becomes a memory and a symbol of nature, passively remembered. One of the most ideologically charged narrative patterns in Indonesian folktales is how women are reduced to “useful” natural elements. In this thematic analysis, the theme *Usefulness as Nature* appears in 10% of the data, indicating that this narrative is not incidental but is part of a recurring and institutionalized structure of meaning. In *Asal Usul Ikan Patin*, Dayang Kumunah’s transformation into a fish marks not only the end of her existence as a human but also the beginning of her new role as a cultural symbol. The people of Riau remember her not as a narrative of autonomy or tragedy but as the origin of the catfish species, which is now economically valuable:

“Masyarakat Riau masih percaya bahwa ikan yang bertransformasi dari Dayang Kumunah menjadi ikan patin.” (K. Dian, 2024, p. 59)

Dayang Kumunah’s value is only recognized after she loses her human form, ceases to be an active subject, and becomes part of the natural environment. In this logic, women gain meaning not because of their agency but because of their potential to become relics, cultural representations, or even economic resources. This transformation, when critically examined,

shows how women’s bodies are institutionalized within a patriarchal framework as “valuable” only after they no longer have freedom or voice.

This phenomenon aligns with the critique offered by Kreditsu (2024) in his study of the Angami-Naga myth. He emphasizes how women who “turn into stone” in folktales are not interpreted as symbols of neutral immortality but as forms of erasure of female existence, transformed into silent symbols, a form of eternal domestication by patriarchy. Just as Dayang Kumunah becomes a fish, women in the Angami myth have no other narrative but to become cultural markers. In the context of gender-sensitive literacy development, Andalas and Bhakti (2025) critique the dominance of such narrative structures and advocate for the creation of folktales that promote gender equality. Using the R2D2 approach (Read, Reflect, Display, Do), they emphasize that old narratives, which position women only as symbols or origins of natural wealth, should be revised to reflect women’s roles as active cultural agents, not merely passive symbols in history.

Malhotra (2025), in his study of domestic Indian stories, shows how women in domestic settings experience similar erasure. When women lose their autonomy, society then creates memories of them in forms that are “settled”, whether as domestic metaphors or as ancestors who can no longer speak. This demonstrates a cross-cultural connection between the symbolic domestication of women and the silencing of their voices and bodies in society. The transformation of women into nature is not a form of spiritual respect but rather another form of erasure of voice, wrapped in utilitarian narratives. Women

are only considered valuable when their bodies and wills no longer pose a threat to the social order controlled by men.

Conclusion

The analysis reveals three interrelated narrative patterns that shape how Indonesian folktales represent femininity, identity, and patriarchal authority.

First, the relationship between femininity and nature is constructed through recurring symbolic transformations in which women are merged with natural elements such as fish, rivers, or water. These transformations are not merely aesthetic motifs but narrative strategies that position women as inherently connected to the natural world. This connection frequently carries moral or spiritual implications, suggesting that female bodies function as mediators between human society and supernatural or ecological forces.

Second, the identities of female characters are repeatedly erased, suspended, or redefined through magical or spiritual transformations. Women who violate social norms, spiritual vows, or patriarchal expectations are often rendered into non-human forms, resulting in the loss of agency, voice, and social belonging. These transformations symbolically relocate women from the realm of human community to natural spaces, thereby redefining their identity through processes of dehumanization or spiritual containment.

Third, the narratives reflect clear patriarchal double standards by depicting spiritual authority, often embodied by male figures, supernatural guardians, or moral laws, as the ultimate arbiter of women's fate. Female characters are required to

conform to idealized standards of obedience, purity, and submission; failure to do so leads to spiritual punishment in the form of irreversible transformation. Through these mechanisms, the stories reproduce a worldview in which the regulation of women's bodies and identities is naturalized as part of a broader patriarchal cosmology.

This study is subject to several limitations that merit acknowledgement. First, the corpus is limited to four published collections of Indonesian folktales, which, despite their relative breadth, cannot fully represent the linguistic, regional, and cultural diversity of Indonesia's oral traditions. Numerous stories remain undocumented, fragmented, or exist in multiple local variants, and these gaps may influence the appearance and distribution of motifs, archetypes, and ecofeminist patterns identified in this analysis. Second, the interpretation of symbolic transformations and gendered motifs relies on close reading and qualitative coding, methods that are inherently shaped by the researcher's positionality. Although NVivo facilitated greater analytic transparency, the coding process remains situated within a specific theoretical lens, ecofeminism, which may illuminate certain themes (such as nature-femininity linkages or spiritual control) while attenuating others. Third, because the study focuses exclusively on textual representations rather than performance contexts, it cannot fully capture how communities narrate, negotiate, or reinterpret these stories within lived cultural settings.

The research findings support the idea that folktales should not only reflect culture but also preserve existing social hierarchies. Hopefully, these findings

provide a fresh perspective, encouraging a broader interpretation that moves beyond the notion that every female character in folktales must transform to conform to social expectations. Thus, this can significantly contribute to the discourse on gender and human-nature relations. The transformation of women into natural elements in folktales should be viewed as a symbol of resistance against dominant structures. Thus, this can significantly contribute to the discourse on gender and human-nature relations.

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