

Female Heroes in Central Java Folktales for Junior High School Students

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ABSTRACT

Female heroes in Indonesian folklore remain underrepresented in literary scholarship despite folklore's significant role in preserving cultural heritage and supporting character education. Previous studies have primarily examined folklore from cultural and moral perspectives, while limited attention has been given to how female heroes challenge patriarchal representations and how these narratives can be integrated into gender-responsive literary learning. Addressing this gap, this study investigates the representation of female heroes in Central Javanese folklore and examines its relevance to literary reading instruction in junior high schools. Employing a descriptive qualitative approach, the study analyzed four Central Javanese folktales featuring female protagonists: Dyah Ayu Sumarti (Blora), Nyai Sedapu (Kendal), Dewi Siti Sari Jati (Rembang), and Putri Trahayu (Semarang). Data were collected through documentation and note-taking techniques and analyzed using data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, while a feminist literary perspective guided the interpretation of female representation. The findings demonstrate that these female protagonists reconstruct conventional gender roles by positioning women as autonomous leaders, strategic decision-makers, and agents of social transformation rather than passive figures. Their heroism is portrayed through resistance to patriarchal constraints, negotiation of social authority, and commitment to communal welfare, offering an alternative narrative of women's leadership in local cultural traditions. These representations provide meaningful pedagogical resources for promoting critical literacy, gender equality awareness, cultural literacy, and character education in junior high school literary learning. The novelty of this study lies in integrating feminist literary analysis with Central Javanese folklore to establish female-centered local narratives as gender-responsive teaching materials, thereby extending the educational function of folklore beyond cultural preservation toward fostering inclusive literary education.

Keywords: cultural literacy; folk tales; gender equality; heroines; junior high school; literature.

INTRODUCTION

Folklore is one of Indonesia's most valuable types of cultural legacy, sustaining collective memory, local wisdom, social values, and cultural identity throughout generations. Folklore, in addition to providing oral amusement, represents society's intellectual framework by reflecting its values, customs, social hierarchy, and gender relations. Folklore, as a cultural text, not only reproduces societal norms but also acts as a vehicle for negotiating and legitimizing

power dynamics between men and women. As a result, the portrayal of women in folklore requires critical scrutiny since literary narratives frequently impact popular conceptions of femininity, leadership, obedience, and women's societal responsibilities (Dorson, 1977; Xue, 2022).

Hundreds of folktales from Central Java remain prominent in local communities, including stories about female heroes, queens, village founders, and legendary women, whose narratives are passed down through oral traditions and instructional resources (Hariyadi et al., 2023). In contrast to the usual image of women as weak, emotional, or dependent characters seen in traditional narratives, many Central Javanese folktales represent women as bold leaders, societal defenders, knowledgeable decision makers, and agents of social reform (Aminah et al., 2023; Kanzunnudin, 2015). These stories show how local wisdom can retain alternative conceptions of femininity that contradict patriarchal preconceptions. Nonetheless, these images have rarely been thoroughly studied from a feminist literary viewpoint, particularly when it comes to female heroines from Central Java (Wiyatmi, 2021). Feminist literary criticism contends that literary texts are never gender neutral since they are created within certain social and ideological contexts. Literary narratives can either perpetuate patriarchal ideology or offer resistance to gender injustice by depicting women as autonomous subjects rather than passive objects (Karima et al., 2025). Feminist analysis tries to expose how women are depicted, power dynamics are produced, and female agency is negotiated in literary works (Karima et al., 2022). In Indonesia, studying folklore through feminist criticism is becoming increasingly significant since it continues to affect character education, cultural literacy, and literature learning in schools. Furthermore, gender-inclusive literary education has emerged as an important topic in fostering equality and decreasing gender stereotypes among young students (Jordan & de Caro, 1986; Ni'mah & Karima, 2022).

Previous research has shown an increasing scholarly interest in feminism in Indonesian folklore. Wiyatmi (Wiyatmi, 2020) investigated the motif of marriages between heavenly maidens and earthly men, noting that these narratives have feminist implications while being generally read from a patriarchal perspective. The study found symbolic negotiations of women's agency within mythological narratives; however, it concentrated on recurring folkloric elements rather than female heroic individuals.

Similarly, some other researcher used feminist literary critique to explore the portrayal of women in the folktale *Nyi Roro Kidul* (Masoga et al., 2021). Their findings show that the protagonist is represented by physical beauty, psychological strength, and social leadership, with women portrayed as courageous, forgiving, and capable of directing society (Jordan & de Caro, 1986). However, the study focuses on a single legendary individual and does not examine larger patterns of female representation in regional folklore.

Amala and Ekasiswanto (Amala & Ekasiswanto, 2013) conducted previous study on the objectification of women in five Indonesian folktales and concluded that patriarchal ideology portrays women as passive objects while males hold powerful social positions. Their analysis clearly exposes patriarchal institutions, but it focuses mostly on women's oppression and objectification, rather than investigating narratives that portray women as active agents or local heroes.

More recently, Hermawan (Hermawan, 2024) examined feminist notions in *Lutung Kasarung* and found that folklore may serve as a social critique of patriarchal structures while fighting for equitable chances for women. Although the study emphasizes women's voices and resistance to gender domination, it is limited to Sundanese folklore and does not look into the unique traits of Central Javanese female heroes within local historical and cultural settings. International scholarship emphasizes the relevance of combining folklore and feminism. (Brown, 2003) Brown contends that folklore is an important cultural arena for understanding

women's lived experiences since traditional narratives both perpetuate and challenge patriarchal ideals. Folklore thus becomes an important resource for studying how gender identities are culturally produced, sustained, and modified throughout time.

Despite these significant improvements, some critical gaps remain. First, present research focuses on women's images, objectification, or feminist values within individual folktales, but comparative assessments of many female heroines from a given cultural location are sparse. Second, past study has mostly focused on identifying feminist representations rather than exploring how local cultural norms shape alternative images of female leadership, courage, wisdom, and agency. Third, while literature is increasingly recognized as a tool for gender-responsive education, few research has linked feminist analyses of folklore to the implications for literature learning and gender-inclusive educational practices. Recent research by Karima and colleagues emphasizes that incorporating gender perspectives into language and literature education promotes critical literacy, inclusive learning environments, and students' awareness of gender equality; however, this approach has rarely been applied to Central Javanese folklore.

As a result, this study overcomes these constraints by examining the image of female heroes in selected Central Javanese folktales using feminist literary theory. Rather than focusing on women's victimization, this study looks at how female protagonists negotiate power, exert leadership, demonstrate agency, and question patriarchal norms embedded in traditional narratives. Furthermore, the study investigates the pedagogical value of these representations in literary learning, particularly in terms of gender-inclusive literacy and character education.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to explore the representation of female heroes in Central Javanese folklore and examine their relevance to literary learning in junior high schools (Salim & Syahrums, 2012). A qualitative approach was selected because it enables an in-depth interpretation of meanings, values, and social phenomena embedded within literary texts without relying on statistical procedures (Moleong, 2018; Creswell, J. W., 2014; Sugiyono, 2020). The study focused on understanding how female heroism is constructed in folklore narratives and how these representations can contribute to gender-sensitive literary education.

The primary data consisted of folklore texts originating from Central Java that feature female heroic figures. The selected texts included *Dyah Ayu Sumarti* from Blora, *Nyai Sedapu* from Kendal, *Dewi Siti Sari Jati* from Rembang, and *Putri Trahayu* from Semarang. These folktales were purposively selected because they contain female protagonists who demonstrate leadership, courage, sacrifice, and social responsibility, which are relevant to the objectives of this study. The data sources were obtained from published folklore collections and documented literary archives (Danandjaja, J., 2007).

Data collection was conducted through documentation and note-taking techniques (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). The researchers carefully read the selected folklore texts, identified narrative units related to female heroism, gender representation, and moral values, and recorded relevant excerpts for further analysis. To ensure the credibility of the findings, repeated reading and cross-checking of textual evidence were carried out throughout the analysis process.

The data were analyzed using the interactive model proposed by (Miles & Huberman, 1994), which consists of three interconnected stages: data reduction, data display, and

conclusion drawing. During the data reduction stage, textual segments related to heroic values, leadership, courage, gender roles, and women's agency were selected and coded. In the data display stage, the identified themes were categorized and organized according to emerging patterns of female heroism and feminist perspectives. Finally, conclusions were drawn by interpreting the representation of female heroes in the selected folklore texts and examining their relevance as learning materials for literary reading in junior high schools.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results of the analysis show that in Central Javanese folklore, female characters are depicted as brave, independent, and have strong leadership. Dyah Ayu Sumarti, written by Sumartono (2009) in his book entitled "*Cerita Rakyat dari Blora (Jawa Tengah)*". The story of Nyai Sedapu, in his book entitled "*Cerita Rakyat Kendal*" (Yudiono, 2013), Dewi Siti Sari Jati, a folk tale from Rembang, in his book entitled "*Dongeng Rakyat dari Kabupaten Rembang*" (YS, 2009). Putri Trahayu, a folk tale from Central Java, in their book entitled "*Cerita Rakyat dari Semarang*" (Suhariato & Nuryatin, 2008). These figures go beyond the stereotype of women who are meek or passive. Instead, they show an active role as subjects of history and agents of change. This aligns with the perspective of existentialist feminism, which positions women as free individuals who determine their own existence (Suwastini, 2013; Tong & Turner, 2008).

DYAH AYU SUMARTI: A REPRESENTATION OF FEMALE AGENCY AND TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN CENTRAL JAVA

From a feminist viewpoint, the narrative of Dyah Ayu Sumarti illustrates women as resilient, autonomous, and proficient in assuming leadership positions within society. In contrast to conventional tales that typically depict women in subordinate roles, Dyah Ayu Sumarti emerges as the pivotal character who orchestrates, instructs, and guides the women of Bangsri Village in their struggle to protect their territory from colonial invaders. Her behavior illustrates that women exhibit equivalent bravery, intellect, and leadership skills as men, contesting patriarchal beliefs that military and political authority is solely a male domain.

The narrative highlights women's independence via Dyah Ayu Sumarti's dismissal of Prince Sumenep's matrimonial offer. Despite the prince's admiration for her beauty and courage, she declines his marriage proposal as she prioritizes her affection for her homeland over her own happiness. This choice embodies a feminist tenet asserting that women possess the autonomy to shape their own destinies free from male impositions or societal coercion. Her refusal represents a challenge to patriarchal dominance and reinforces women's autonomy in making independent decisions.

An additional significant feminist dimension is the depiction of women as engaged contributors in the fight against colonial subjugation. Dyah Ayu Sumarti not only motivates defiance but also collaborates with Naya Gimbal and the villagers as an equal ally. She instructs other women to become warriors, illustrating that courage and power are not attributes confined to men. The joint efforts of the women's forces underscore female unity and empowerment, demonstrating that women can come together to safeguard their community and play a vital role in social and political transformation.

The narrative portrays Dyah Ayu Sumarti as an emblem of female emancipation, defying conventional gender norms through her leadership, bravery, intellect, and resolve. Her persona exemplifies that women are not simply passive entities in history, but possess the

ability to spearhead movements, combat oppression, and influence the trajectory of their society. This depiction advocates for feminist principles of equality, autonomy, and women's proactive involvement in the quest for justice and national liberation.

PUTRI TRAHAYU: REPRESENTING WOMEN AS AGENTS OF CIVILIZATIONAL CHANGE.

In contrast to the portrayal of women in numerous folktales as mere objects of rescue or admiration for their beauty, Princess Trahayu is depicted as an individual with complete autonomy in shaping her own destiny. Her choice to depart from the palace in pursuit of her two younger siblings illustrates that women are not restricted to private spheres, but possess the agency to navigate public domains and make calculated choices. From the viewpoint of liberal feminism (Tong, 2014), the action signifies women's entitlement to autonomously make life decisions without dependence on male figures. Princess Trahayu's expedition transcends a mere quest for kinship; it embodies an intellectual metamorphosis that forges her identity as a female leader.

The educational journey from Batara Murti demonstrates that knowledge serves as the primary tool for the empowerment of women. The designation Putri Trahayu, understood as a female figure who leads women to an elevated society, indicates that intellectual dominance is not exclusively held by men. Within the context of Showalter's gyno criticism (1979), this depiction illustrates women as creators of knowledge rather than solely as narrative subjects. The governance of Princess Trahayu is founded on sagacity, knowledge, and the capacity to foster educational communities, rather than on martial strength. This broadens the notion of female heroism beyond the physical realm to encompass intellectual and social leadership.

This discovery contrasts with the study conducted by Amala and Ekasiswanto (2013), which indicates that the majority of women in Indonesian folklore are portrayed as objects of patriarchy and undergo objectification. In the narrative of Putri Trahayu, females emerge as pivotal figures in societal advancement via education, fostering more equitable power dynamics between genders. This examination further enhances the study conducted by Oftavia et al. (2023) regarding Putri Kandita, which highlights the portrayal of women as courageous leaders, as Putri Trahayu not only guides the community but also reshapes the social framework through education as a means of empowering women. Consequently, Putri Trahayu embodies a manifestation of defiance against patriarchal culture via the acquisition of knowledge and social authority, aligning with Butler's (1990) assertion that gender identity is constructed through social behaviors that perpetually contest entrenched gender conventions.

DEWI SITI SARI JATI: DECONSTRUCTING MASCULINITY IN WOMEN'S HEROISM

Dewi Siti Sari Jati exemplifies a multifaceted manifestation of female heroism, as it integrates aspects of spirituality, political authority, and martial valor. In a patriarchal society, combat and governance are typically regarded as male spheres (Walby, 1990). Nonetheless, this character assumes that role by employing the tactic of masquerading as Jaka Samaran. This concealment can be interpreted via Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity, which posits that masculinity and femininity are not immutable biological identities, but rather malleable social enactments. Dewi Siti Sari Jati adopts a male persona not due to the subjugation of women, but as a tactic to navigate the societal frameworks that restrict women's entry into leadership and combat arenas.

The valor exhibited by Dewi Siti Sari Jati was not aimed at acquiring individual authority, but instead focused on safeguarding the community and preserving religious principles. Consequently, her valor is established upon the principles of a caring ethic and civic

bravery. This viewpoint illustrates that female leadership is not synonymous with control, but instead with community service. This broadens the definition of feminism, which not only advocates for equal rights but also acknowledges women's roles in societal development.

This depiction contrasts with Hermawan's (2024) study on Lutung Kasarung, which highlights critiques of patriarchal supremacy within the Sundanese societal framework. Dewi Siti Sari Jati critiques patriarchy both symbolically and by actively engaging in male-dominated spheres, showcasing women's abilities as leaders, orators, and warriors. Moreover, in contrast to the conclusions drawn by Amala and Ekasiswanto (2013) that portray women as subordinate entities, Dewi Siti Sari Jati surfaces as a historical figure endowed with political and spiritual power. Consequently, this narrative illustrates that the valor of women in Central Javanese folklore is constructed through a fusion of spirituality, intellect, and political bravery that confronts conventional gender norms.

NYAI SEDAPU: FEMINISM BASED ON SOCIAL CARE AND LOCAL KNOWLEDGE.

Nyai Sedapu exemplifies a paradigm of female leadership that diverges from the preceding two figures. Her valor was exhibited not via combat or political authority, but through civic engagement, the cultivation of indigenous knowledge, and the stewardship of natural resources. Her capacity to create Sendang Sebrayat has become an emblem that women are the origin of life and societal well-being. From the viewpoint of cultural feminism (Tong, 2014), this character exemplifies that traits typically linked to femininity, including compassion, empathy, and nurturing capabilities, are not weaknesses but rather advantageous social assets.

Besides her role as a religious leader, Nyai Sedapu was also proficient in traditional medicine and agriculture, demonstrating that women possess authority over indigenous knowledge. In Showalter's paradigm (1979), women are depicted as creators of culture and knowledge, rather than simply as custodians of tradition. Her contribution to enhancing community welfare demonstrates that women's leadership can be achieved via sustainable community development rather than through authoritarian control.

This discovery enhances Wiyatmi's (2021) study, which emphasizes the representation of feminism in Indonesian folklore via cultural symbols. If Wiyatmi highlights the significance of gender dynamics in matrimonial themes, then the narrative of Nyai Sedapu exemplifies the tangible application of women's empowerment via social services and the acquisition of indigenous knowledge. Consequently, Nyai Sedapu illustrates that the valor of women in Central Javanese mythology is established not solely through physical courage but also through intellectual, spiritual, and ecological abilities that foster sustainable community advancement. The following are female hero figures in Central Java folk tales who have heroic values.

Table 1. Female Heroes in Central Javanese Folk Tales

Number	Female Heroine	Region of Origin of Folktale	Heroic Values
1	Diyah Ayu Sumarti	Blora	Courage against colonisers, nationalism, women's leadership, adherence to principles, and resistance to oppression. This figure demonstrates that women, like men, can lead the struggle and defend the nation's sovereignty.
2.	Nyai Sedapu	Kendal	Intelligence, a desire to learn, social responsibility, courage, sacrifice, and community-based leadership. His heroism is manifested in community empowerment through education, natural resource management, and collective benefit.
3.	Dewi Siti Sari Jati	Rembang	Religious leadership, courage, ingenuity, sacrifice, and commitment to community safety. This figure depicts women as

			educators, leaders, and fighters who leave a mark on history and culture for future generations.
4.	Putri Trahayu	Semarang	Diligence, intelligence, visionary leadership, independence, and a dedication to education. Her heroism affirms women's roles as change agents who propel civilization forward through knowledge and community empowerment.

According to Table 1, the character Dyah Ayu Sumarti represents women's heroism based on courage, nationalism, leadership, and steadfastness in the struggle for independence. Unlike the representations of women that are frequently associated with beauty or domestic roles, Dyah Ayu Sumarti emerges as a leader capable of organizing the women of Bangsri Village to fight the colonizers. Her refusal of the Prince of Sumenep's proposal because he sided with the colonizers demonstrates that national interests were prioritized over personal interests. Her unwavering commitment to principles and bravery in the face of oppression demonstrate that women, like men, have the ability to lead in the struggle. This story portrays women as symbols of patriotism, leadership, and resistance to colonialism.

According to Table 2, Nyai Sedapu embodies women's heroism through intelligence, social concern, and community-based leadership. Her heroism was demonstrated through tangible contributions to the community's well-being rather than through warfare. Her diligence in pursuing religious knowledge and traditional medicine demonstrates that women have the right and ability to acquire knowledge. Furthermore, her success in providing a community water source, as well as her role as a pioneer of Boja Village, demonstrate visionary leadership and a commitment to the common good. This story demonstrates how women's heroism can be realized through dedication, innovation, and community empowerment.

Table 3 portrays Dewi Siti Sari Jati as a woman who exemplifies religious leadership, courage, intelligence, and sacrifice. Her role as a disseminator of Islamic teachings demonstrates women's authority as educators and agents of social change. Her bravery in confronting Haryo Damar to protect the people, as well as her strategy of disguising herself as Jaka Samaran, demonstrates intelligence and resilience in the face of danger. Her sacrifice until the end of her life became a symbol of her commitment to the community, and toponyms such as Sumur Kemudi, Ambarwangi, and Jatisari serve as historical records of her contributions. Therefore, the story of Dewi Siti Sari Jati emphasises that women's heroism is built through a combination of religious values, courage, sacrifice, and leadership orientated towards the welfare of the community.

Meanwhile, Table 4 shows that Princess Trahayu represents women as agents of change through education, visionary leadership, and the development of civilisation. Her willingness to leave palace life to search for her siblings reflects steadfastness and sacrifice in fulfilling her responsibilities. Her learning process with Batara Murti demonstrates the importance of knowledge as the foundation of leadership, and she eventually earned the title of Putri Trahayu as a leader who led women to a more advanced civilisation. Her influence encouraged both men and women to learn equally at the hermitage, demonstrating her dedication to universal access to education. Her name's legacy, which lives on in various toponyms such as Goa Trayu, Dusun Trisaba, and Desa Cangkiran, strengthens her contribution to societal development. Thus, Princess Trahayu exemplifies women as intellectual leaders who drive social change through education and community empowerment.

Overall, these four folktales show that female heroism in Central Javanese folklore is manifested not only through bravery in the face of conflict, but also through various forms of community-oriented leadership. Dyah Ayu Sumarti represents patriotic leadership and resistance to colonialism, Nyai Sedapu exemplifies devotional leadership and community empowerment, Dewi Siti Sari Jati exemplifies religious leadership characterized by courage

and sacrifice, and Putri Trahayu exemplifies intellectual leadership through education and civilizational development. These findings show that Central Java folklore depicts various types of female heroism while also affirming women's roles as leaders, educators, protectors, and agents of social change in community life.

RELEVANCE IN JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL LITERATURE LEARNING

The integration of Central Java folktales with female hero characters in literature education offers students a wealth of opportunities to comprehend literary works as not only a form of entertainment, but also as a means of character development, cultural identity reinforcement, and social awareness (Anggraheni et al., 2022). According to the research findings, women like Dyah Ayu Sumarti, Nyai Sedapu, Dewi Siti Sari Jati, and Putri Trahayu embody courage, intelligence, leadership, responsibility, community concern, and a spirit of sacrifice for the greater good. Students are encouraged to connect the characters' experiences to their own life realities through activities such as reading, character analysis, conflict identification, and interpretation of the story's values (Marlina et al., 2021). This process not only improves the ability to understand literary texts, but it also fosters critical, reflective, and appreciative thinking about locally produced literary works.

Research shows that female heroes in Central Java folklore embody a variety of character values that are pertinent to the objectives of 21st-century education and the implementation of character education in schools. Dyah Ayu Sumarti's bravery in leading the resistance against the colonizers exemplifies values such as nationalism, leadership, and love for the homeland. Nyai Sedapu's struggle to protect the people exemplifies social concern, wisdom, and community dedication. Dewi Siti Sari Jati exemplifies steadfastness, patience, and integrity in upholding the principle of truth, whereas Putri Trahayu demonstrates intelligence, responsibility, and decision-making abilities in the face of various challenges. These values can be internalised by students through learning activities such as critical discussions, reflections, presentations, or project-based assignments, allowing them to not only understand the story's content but also apply these values in their daily lives.

In addition to strengthening character education, the representation of female heroes in Central Java folklore contributes significantly to the development of a more inclusive view of gender relations. According to the research findings, women in folklore are depicted as more than just companions or domestic figures; they are also leaders, warriors, societal protectors, decision-makers, and agents of social change. This representation provides an alternative to traditional narratives that place women in subordinate roles. Thus, literature learning based on folk tales can help students develop a more critical understanding of gender equality, appreciate women's contributions to local history and culture, and foster a mutual respect attitude without gender-based roles.

Overall, the findings of this study confirm that Central Java folktales featuring female hero characters have great potential as a source of contextual, inclusive, and character-driven literary learning. These stories not only help students improve their literacy skills, but they also instill values such as courage, leadership, responsibility, justice, social concern, nationalism, and respect for gender equality. As a result, the use of folktales with female heroes should be systematically integrated into literary education in order to strengthen character education, preserve local culture, and shape a generation with a more critical and inclusive understanding of culture, society, and gender (Asturi & Rosyidi, 2022).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study demonstrates that female heroes in Central Javanese folklore are represented as independent, courageous, and empowered figures who actively contribute to the welfare of their communities. Through characters such as *Dyah Ayu Sumarti*, *Nyai Sedapu*, *Dewi Siti Sari Jati*, and *Putri Trahayu*, women are portrayed not merely as supporting characters but as leaders, problem-solvers, and agents of social change. The findings indicate that these folktales contain important values, including courage, leadership, justice, responsibility, sacrifice, perseverance, and social concern. From a feminist perspective, the stories challenge patriarchal assumptions and provide alternative representations of women's roles in society.

The study further reveals that folktales featuring female heroes are highly relevant to junior high school literature learning. Their integration into classroom instruction can support the development of reading literacy, cultural literacy, character education, critical thinking, and awareness of gender equality. As local cultural products, these stories also contribute to preserving regional heritage while fostering students' appreciation of diversity and social justice.

Based on these findings, teachers are encouraged to incorporate folklore featuring female heroes into literature learning materials and classroom discussions to create more inclusive and gender-responsive learning environments. Curriculum developers and educational policymakers may also consider integrating such texts into literary learning resources at the secondary school level. Future studies are recommended to develop instructional models and assessment instruments based on female-centered folklore and to conduct experimental or mixed-method research to evaluate their effectiveness in improving students' literacy skills, character development, and gender awareness. In addition, broader comparative studies involving folklore from different regions of Indonesia may enrich the understanding of female heroism in local cultural traditions.

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