

Mythical guardians to modern advocates: Rewriting Mbok Delima, a guardian of food sovereignty in ASEAN context

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ABSTRACT

Reframing Mbok Delima in the Osing-Javanese folktale Panji Gimawang through a Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) lens, this study reveals her obscured expertise in agriculture and food security and challenges the patriarchal bias of traditional storytelling. Using Todorov's narrative sequence, equilibrium, disruption, recognition, repair, and new equilibrium, The researcher demonstrates how Mbok Delima can be repositioned as the primary agent safeguarding food sovereignty. We propose a portable rewriting framework that blends gender analysis, social-inclusion metrics, and pedagogical strategies. Although rooted in a Javanese case, the framework is transferable across Southeast Asia: comparable agrarian heroines such as Mae Posop (Thailand), can likewise be reinterpreted to amplify women's roles in local food systems. By aligning with ASEAN principles of respect, peace, prosperity, diversity, and human-rights protection, as well as the ASEAN Integrated Food Security Framework 2025, this study positions folktale revision as a regional strategy for promoting progressive gender dynamics, inclusive cultural discourse, and resilient food security.

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Introduction

Fairy tales constitute a vital component of cultural heritage, embodying the social constructions of their supporting communities (Backer, 2019; Harun et al., 2021; Ningsih et al., 2024; Nurhayati, 2019; MacDonald, 2013; Yusuf et al., 2021). Within the study of fairy tales, Southeast Asian narratives often depict female heroes as guardians of access to staple foods. Legends such as Dewi Sri (Indonesia), Mae Posop (Thailand), and the story of Kinomulok (Malaysia), a girl whose sacrifice results in the growth of rice and other food crops, portray women as deities or protectors of rice, a staple food in the region (Dewi, 2022; McDonald, 2018). Comparative analyses of folktales across Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and neighboring Southeast Asian countries reveal interconnected cultural heritages (Browne, 2008; Harun et al., 2021; Lwin, 2017; Masmuzidin et al., 2012; Ngan, 2020; O'morchoe, 2020; Van et al., 2020; Wannakit, 2019). These stories not only reflect the character of communities or nations but also serve as repositories of shared cultural knowledge, experiences, hopes, fears, and moral values passed down through generations.

Specifically, Southeast Asian folktales often feature female heroes who maintain access to staple foods, particularly rice. In Indonesia, the legend of Dewi Sri depicts her as a woman seated cross-legged on a padmasana, holding a kamandalu in her right hand and a bunch of rice in her left. The veneration of Dewi

Sri, believed to have existed since prehistoric times prior to Hindu and Buddhist influences entering the archipelago (Rahman, 2016; Nastiti, 2020; Budiono, 2018; Fitrahayunitisna et al., 2022; Sugita et al., 2021), underscores her significance as a fertility goddess and protector of rice.

In Thai mythology, Mae Posop is consistently depicted carrying a bunch of rice in her right hand, symbolizing fertility and rice goddesshood, and continues to be worshipped predominantly by farming communities (Davis, 2011; Khao & Rue, 2014; McDonald, 2018; Nguyen, 2024). In Malaysian tradition, rice is believed to possess a spiritual essence, an animating spirit that embodies vitality and sustains life. This spirit, often envisioned as a miniature replica of its host or manifesting as an insect, bird, or animal, is represented as a pregnant woman, symbolizing mother rice and the vital force that sustains life.

Rice remains the primary food source for Indonesians, including Javanese, Balinese, and Sundanese populations. Historically, rice has served as an instrument for maintaining economic and political stability (Maryoto, 2009) and is also regarded as a symbol of societal welfare. A related folktale involves Panji Gimawang, where Mbok Delima, an elder sister figure in the Banyuwangi Osing community—serves as a guardian of food access. Although less prominent than Sri Tanjung, the central figure in Banyuwangi's origins, Mbok Delima embodies a significant cultural archetype. Her character, however, has yet to be extensively studied as a primary narrative figure. In the context of Dewi Sri's symbolism of fertility and prosperity, Mbok Delima similarly represents wealth, glory, and health.

Within the story of Panji Gimawang, Mbok Delima is portrayed as possessing extraordinary skills in rice cultivation and management, admired particularly by Panji Gimawang (Singodimayan et al., 2002). She is depicted with a magical jarit (long cloth in batik motif) capable of planting hectares of rice with a mere wave, harvesting rice through her sacred jarit. Nonetheless, traditional versions tend to marginalize her role, overshadowing her with male figures. Studies on women's narratives in folklore reveal that female representations are often influenced by patriarchal norms (Ariefa & Mutiawanthi, 2017). Recent research, however, indicates that revisions to folklore can create space for women to be recognized as active agents in food security and cultural preservation (Xu, 2022; Juansah et al., 2021).

The reinterpretation of female figures in folklore has become a strategic approach within gender equality and social inclusivity discourse (Baba, 2016; Babaran & Nguyen, 2020). Viewing folklore as a social discourse allows for the adaptation of traditional narratives to reflect more progressive gender dynamics.

In the treasures of Southeast Asian folklore, the figures of food guardians, Dewi Sri in the archipelago, Mae Posop in Thailand, and Kinomulok in Sabah, are praised as symbols of fertility. However, when these narratives are examined more closely, a consistent pattern emerges: women's agrarian skills are mythologically revered but ignored in practice. The case of Mbok Delima from the Panji Gimawang cycle shows this paradox strikingly.

Oral and textual versions of Panji Gimawang (Singodimayan et al., 2002) depicts Mbok Delima only as a woman who is admired by Panji Gimawang because she has a long magical cloth, which is able to plant and harvest rice in an instant. He is not the main character of his own story, although he is contested by his two older brothers and Panji Gimawang who want access to his magic in managing rice fields. This pattern is linear with the findings that women are heavily involved in various postharvest activities throughout Southeast Asia.

In India, for example, women perform important tasks such as cleaning, sorting, drying, storing, processing, and marketing agricultural products. Similarly, in Bangladesh, women are involved in a variety of agricultural production activities, including land preparation, nursery maintenance, transplanting, and post-harvest activities. In Indonesia, women are actively involved in processing and marketing in local economic organizations, particularly in the crab fishing and processing industry. This activity is essential for food security, poverty alleviation, and sustainable development (Alam & Rahman, 2018; Amandaria et al., 2025). This pattern parallels ethnographic data in Southeast Asia which shows that women control 60–80% of post-harvest work, but only 15% attend village agricultural deliberations (FAO, 2022).

Research employing the Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) framework emphasizes that reconstructing folktale narratives can elevate the roles of female characters without diminishing their significance. For example, the character of Mulan has been reimagined through gender discourse, shifting from implicit patriarchy to egalitarian relationships between genders (Juansah et al., 2021; Xu, 2022).

The GESI approach, which prioritizes equitable access and services for marginalized groups, including women, also informs empowerment policies that foster gender-responsive and inclusive educational materials aligned with ASEAN values such as mutual respect, peace, security, welfare, diversity, and human rights (Baba, 2016; Babaran & Nguyen, 2020; Hind & Marcoes, 2022).

This study aims to highlight the genius and heroism of Mbok Delima as a framework for reshaping her narrative, positioning her as a protagonist in her own right and reaffirming women's vital roles in managing and maintaining food security. Although previous research has acknowledged women's strategic roles as guardians of food access, there remains a lack of comprehensive studies that re-narrate Mbok Delima's

character and intellectual contributions to food security. This research proposes fundamental points, viewed through the GESI lens, to facilitate narrative rewriting that emphasizes her independence, complexity, and authority within agricultural and food security contexts (Kusumastuti, 2015).

The reinterpretation of female figures in folklore has become a strategic approach in the discourse on gender equality and social inclusivity (Baba, 2016; Babaran & Nguyen, 2020). Seeing folklore as a social discourse allows for the adaptation of traditional narratives to reflect more progressive gender dynamics. Research using the Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) framework emphasizes that reconstructing folklore narratives can enhance the role of female characters without diminishing their significance. For example, the character of Mulan has been rearranged through gender discourse, shifting from implicit patriarchy to egalitarian relations between genders (Juansah et al., 2021; Xu, 2022). The GESI approach, which prioritizes equitable access and services for marginalized groups, including women, also informs empowerment policies that foster gender-responsive and inclusive educational materials aligned with ASEAN values such as mutual respect, peace, security, welfare, diversity, and human rights (Baba, 2016; Babaran & Nguyen, 2020; Hind & Marcoes, 2022).

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Revising the story of Mbok Delima to highlight themes of resilience, community support, and sustainable agricultural practices can provide a culturally relevant framework that aligns with ASEAN's food security goals. This approach can help in promoting gender equality and social inclusion by embedding these values within a familiar and respected cultural context (Akter et al., 2017). Given the accelerating pace of globalization, the urgency to preserve and reconstruct traditional narratives becomes increasingly apparent. Such efforts not only safeguard cultural heritage but also foster the development of new identities relevant to contemporary societal dynamics.

Thus, revising the story of Mbok Delima is not just "correcting" old fairy tales, but also re-inserting women's agrarian knowledge into the public sphere. The new narrative asserts that the Mbok Delima agency can function as:

1. Pedagogical tools for basic food security education,
2. Advocacy framework for women to sit in village seed management institutions,
3. A source of inspiration for local campaigns in ASEAN member countries that have similar challenges related to land access, seed varieties, and recognition of women's expertise.

This approach is in line with the principles of Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI): it not only highlights inequality, but also offers a social imagination to women, such as Mbok Delima, who are key actors in responding to the region's food crisis. Given the accelerating pace of globalization, the urgency to preserve and reconstruct traditional narratives becomes increasingly apparent. Such efforts not only safeguard cultural heritage but also foster the development of new identities relevant to contemporary societal dynamics.

Method

This research focuses on elucidating the intellectual and personal attributes of Mbok Delima, with the potential for narrative elaboration through the GESI perspective. The analysis of Panji Gimawang's story was conducted via close reading of the Banyuwangi People's Fairytale collection manuscript (Singodimayan et al., 2002). The narrative was examined through Todorov's structuralist approach, which emphasizes the analysis of narrative components and their functions (Hand, 2020; Yeung, 2017). Todorov's concept of narratology refers to the structural analysis of story elements, revealing their relationships and functions.

Contemporary narratology has evolved into a discipline with both theoretical and practical orientations, encouraging the revitalization of narrative analysis, communication, and expression across media (Puckett, 2019; Mikkonen, 2020). Initially inspired by structuralist linguistics, narratology seeks to identify the core elements of narrative (Mikkonen, 2020). Narrative theory, as a form of communication, aims to understand the multidimensional relationship between storyteller and audience, evaluating narratives within their cultural and social contexts (Herman et al., 2012; Puckett, 2019). Key issues in narrative analysis—such as narrative time, sound, and mood—are elaborated through techniques focusing on narrator, narrative level, perspective, and temporal sequence, applicable even in visual media like comics (Didipu, 2020).

The research employed a descriptive qualitative methodology, analyzing the main character of Mbok Delima within the folklore of Panji Gimawang through close textual reading. The narrative's chronological structure, motifs, and plot were examined, with particular attention to the five stages of narrative development: (1) a state of equilibrium; (2) disturbance of order; (3) realization of disturbance; (4) efforts to repair; and (5) a new equilibrium (Richardson, 2017; Taum, 2018). These stages are cyclical rather than linear.

Using Todorov's narrative cycle chart, the researcher identified the roles of Mbok Delima as a female food guardian, analyzing dialogue, conflict, and resolution to uncover her intellectual and personal traits. These insights serve as a foundation for reimagining her narrative from a GESI perspective can be seen in Figure 1.

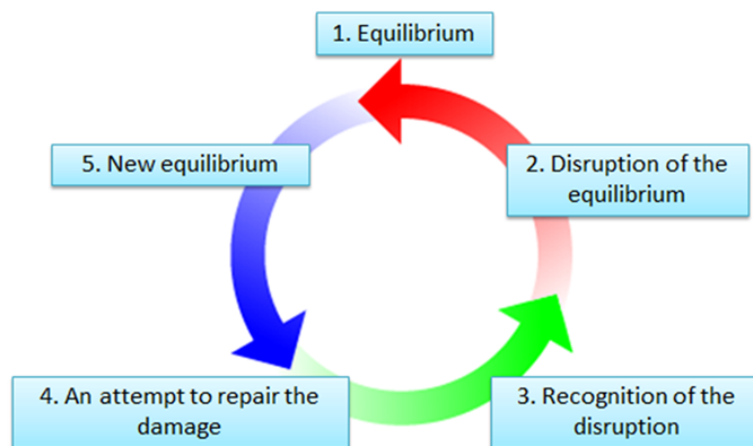


Fig. 1. Todorov Narrative's Cycle

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This study uses a qualitative methodology by analyzing the main character of Mbok Delima in the folklore of Panji Gimawang through careful textual reading. This research is qualitative-narrative with the aim of reconstructing the story of Panji Gimawang, especially the character of Mbok Delima, using the lens of Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI), which includes eight domains of GESI, namely agency, decision authority, access-control assets, networks, stereotypical challenges, symbolic representation, benefit distribution, and collective narrative.

By the late 1960s, narratology had developed a formal explanation of narratives and their functions. In the early stages the discipline of narrative was inspired by structuralist linguistics and sought to identify the main constitutive elements of narrative (Mikkonen, 2020). The researcher adapted Todorov's narrative cycle chart to identify the role of the character of Mbok Delima as a female food keeper, dialogue, conflict, and resolution of the storytelling of Mbok Delima in the folklore of Panji Gimawang. The results of the identification in the form of points of intellect and personality of Mbok Delima that have the potential to be the framework for rearranging the narrative of Mbok Delima from the perspective of GESI.

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From Todorov's narrative cycle chart, the researcher identifies Mbok Delima's role as a keeper of women's food, analyzing dialogue, conflict, and resolution to reveal her intellectual and personal nature. This insight serves as the basis for reframing its narrative from GESI's perspective. Using Todorov's narrative cycle chart, the researcher identified Mbok Delima's role as a woman who guarded food access, analyzing dialogue, conflict, and resolution to reveal her intellectual and personal nature. This insight serves as the basis for reframing its narrative from GESI's perspective.

Table 1. Eight Domains of GESI

<i>No.</i>	<i>Domain GESI</i>	<i>Indikator Naratif</i>
1	Agency	Female characters start key action
2	Decision authority	Women's voices determine collective decisions
3	Access–control assets	Seed or barn ownership/management
4	Networking	Cross-gender/age collaboration
5	Stereotype challenges	Actions that challenge patriarchal norms
6	Symbolic Representation	Titles, metaphors, or positive images of women
7	Benefit distribution	The outcome of the story is enjoyed equally by vulnerable groups
8	Collective narrative	Focus the story on "us" instead of the lone hero

Results and Discussion

This study offers significant insights into how culture influences folklore in the Banyuwangi region and Southeast Asia, particularly regarding food security and gender representation. Rice is not merely a dietary staple but also a fertility symbol, worshipped through rituals such as the Mapag Sri ceremony, still practiced by farmers (Fathoni, 2020; Ngurah, 2021; Sugita et al., 2021). The veneration of Dewi Sri, depicted as a seated woman holding a kamandalu and rice stalk, predates Hindu and Buddhist influences, indicating its deep prehistoric roots (Rahman, 2016).

In the Panji Gimawang folktale, Mbok Delima is portrayed as an expert in rice cultivation and management, admired for her knowledge and skills (Singodimayan et al., 2002). Despite her expertise, traditional narratives tend to position her in a subordinate or supportive role, reflecting patriarchal norms that limit women's agency. Such portrayals reinforce stereotypes that confine women to romantic or protective roles, as seen in characters like Sri Tanjung and Surati (Ariefa & Mutiawanthi, 2017). This constrains the emergence of more complex, autonomous female characters and perpetuates social norms marginalizing women's authority in cultural and historical contexts.

The findings underscore the importance of reinterpreting folklore, particularly the Mbok Delima narrative, to foreground women as active agents in food security and traditional knowledge. This aligns with efforts to develop gender-responsive educational materials and promote social inclusion (Baba, 2016; Babaran & Nguyen, 2020). By reconstructing her story through the GESI lens—similar to the feminist reinterpretation of Mulan—there is potential to depict Mbok Delima as a more diverse, independent, and authoritative figure within agricultural and food security domains (Juansah et al., 2021; Xu, 2022).

Framework for Rewriting Mbok Delima's Story Using the GESI Perspective

In contemporary folklore and cultural preservation, reinterpreting traditional narratives through the GESI framework offers a powerful means of engaging with historical consciousness and societal relevance (Juansah et al., 2021; Morales, n.d.). The paper *From Myth to Meal: Reinterpreting the Role of Female Guardians like Mbok Delima on Food Sovereignty in ASEAN Nations* advocates for a critical reassessment of traditional stories, positioning them within the discourse on food sovereignty and gender dynamics. This approach not only preserves cultural heritage but also facilitates the reimagining of mythologies with contemporary socio-political significance. The proposed framework for rewriting Mbok Delima's story through GESI comprises several interconnected layers: (1) Contextualization of History and Culture: The narrative of Mbok Delima, as a revered figure representing resilience and cultural identity among the Osing Banyuwangi community, functions as a symbol of perseverance. This layer involves situating myths within the broader Southeast Asian historical and cultural landscape, examining origins, variations, and social resonance. Historical contextualization traces the evolution of legends, while cultural resonance explores how myths reflect societal experiences related to food security; (2) Integration of GESI Principles: Reframing for Empowerment and Disruption of Traditional Gender Roles: This layer emphasizes the incorporation of GESI principles in narrative reconstruction, focusing on:

Gender Analysis: Highlighting women's roles—particularly in traditional knowledge stewardship and food production—and reinterpreting female characters as active contributors rather than passive figures.

Social Inclusion: Addressing intersectionality—considering class, ethnicity, age—to ensure the narrative resonates inclusively across diverse social groups. This ensures myths remain dynamic, relevant stories that intersect with contemporary issues of equality and justice; (3) Narrative Reinterpretation and Pedagogical Implications: This component involves developing educational modules that embed GESI principles within folklore studies. Methodological strategies include:

Rewriting Techniques: Utilizing oral history, participatory research, and interdisciplinary approaches to gather and reinterpret variants of the story.

Educational Tools: Transforming myths into pedagogical resources that promote themes of gender equality, cultural preservation, and community resilience, thereby infusing traditional narratives with contemporary social relevance; (4) Critical Analysis and Policy Relevance: This layer underscores the importance of reflective methodologies in discourse transformation, emphasizing:

Policy Implications: Recognizing that narrative rewriting extends beyond literature into policy debates on food sovereignty and gender empowerment, prompting re-evaluation of existing practices.

Researcher Reflexivity: Acknowledging the researcher's positionality in constructing narratives, balancing respect for indigenous culture with advocacy for social reform.

This comprehensive framework underscores the transformative potential of retelling traditional myths through the GESI perspective. By reimagining Mbok Delima's story, this approach revitalizes Southeast Asian folklore and reinforces commitments to gender equality and social inclusion. It provides a methodological and conceptual guide for scholars, educators, and policymakers seeking to leverage folklore as a tool for cultural empowerment and social transformation. The framework fosters multidisciplinary dialogue, bridging folklore, gender studies, and policy analysis, and offers fertile ground for further scholarly exploration.

Mbok Delima's Narrative with a GESI Perspective: Superhero Women in the Food and Agriculture Sector

The effort to rewrite Mbok Delima's story, derived from Panji Gimawang folklore, aims to perpetuate the memory of Dewi Sri's role, symbolizing the divine feminine in food sovereignty, while emphasizing women's strategic roles as scholars and custodians of food resources. Dewi Sri, depicted in statues as a seated woman with a kamandalu and rice stalk, exemplifies fertility and sustenance, a figure venerated across Indonesia and Thailand (Davis, 2011; Khao & Rue, 2014; Nastiti, 2020).

The narrative model for reimagining Mbok Delima through the GESI lens involves applying Todorov's five-stage narrative cycle: equilibrium, disturbance, realization, repair, and new equilibrium (Herman, 2019; Todorov, 2024). This analytical approach facilitates a nuanced understanding of her role as a female food guardian, encompassing dialogue, conflict, and resolution can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2. Folklore of Mbok Delima (Oral Stories and Anthology Books of Banyuwangi Folklore)

<i>Folklore of Mbok Delima (Oral Stories and Anthology Books of Banyuwangi Folklore)</i>				
<i>Equilibrium</i>	<i>Disruption</i>	<i>Recognition</i>	<i>Repair</i>	<i>New Equilibrium</i>
Mbok Delima lives happily by planting and harvesting rice, she has a magic jarit that helps him plant and harvest rice quickly in the vast rice fields. She lives with her parents and two older brothers in the Tegaldlimo area of Banyuwangi	Panji Gimawang wants to get Delima's help to harvest rice in his vast rice fields	Delima is willing to help harvest rice in the Panji Gimawang rice field. Panji fall in love to Delima. Delima's two older brothers did not like this fact because they thought that Gimawang would only take advantage of Delima's magic jarit	Gimawang and Delima's two older brothers quarreled because they thought Gimawang would harm Delima and take advantage of it	All four died in the fight

In the original story, Mbok Delima is said not to express his personal opinion that he wanted to help Panji Gimawang with his two brothers. In fact, Delima's opinion is important to actualize her ability as a woman who has full access to the practice of planting and harvesting rice, through her magic fingers. This more gender-fair storytelling should actually strengthen the point of agency and authority of female characters in the lens of GESI.

GESI's perspective views gender equality as a fundamental principle of social justice, emphasizing equal rights and opportunities for all individuals, regardless of gender. Women's empowerment, especially in the political and social spheres, is essential to achieve gender equality. Women's participation in decision-making roles is critical to gender equality. The study highlights the importance of women's representation in politics and other leadership positions to ensure their voices are heard and their interests are represented (García & Ovejas, 2024; Mashtalir et al., 2022).

The voice of the Mbok Delima is not spoken, even though it is the one who has full access to the ability to manage rice fields. The two brothers and Panji Gimawang actually quarreled because they were afraid of losing access to control of Delima's ability to cultivate rice fields. Pomegranate is also not told as a key figure who has the authority to make decisions, let alone control which assets he can and cannot handle. Mbok Delima is not the main character of the story itself, including the title of a folklore that doesn't even use his name. The story ends tragically, Delima's character as a scholar of rice breeders is not recognized and the story focuses more on the duel of men who prioritize patriarchal values.

Folklore is used to condition its listeners, including young people, to the way of life of their people (Yakubu, 2018). The narration of Mbok Delima in the folklore of Panji Gimawang proves to the reader or listener that women play a key role in food matters. Delima is not stereotypically depicted as being a contested figure because of her physical attractiveness, like other female stories in folklore who tend to be flattered just because of their beauty. The uniqueness of the story of Delima is the main asset in retelling the story from the perspective of GESI.

In the context of the study of gender equality in the framework of Sarah Mills' thought which prioritizes the bias of texts featuring female figures in novels, pictures, photographs, texts or in current events (Marfudhotun & Wiyatmi, 2021), the narration of Delima stops as a woman who has the ability to plant and harvest rice effectively using her magic jarit. It is the most desirable resource because it has significant access to food sources. When she wanted to help Gimawang, she could not freely convey her intentions to his two older brothers because she was afraid. The gender bias in Panji Gimawang's story was changed to obtain a text that was more gender-fair and focused on the character of Delima can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3. The Main Point of Rewriting the Folklore of Mbok Delima

<i>The Main Point</i>	<i>Equilibrium</i>	<i>Disruption</i>	<i>Recognition</i>	<i>Repair</i>	<i>New Equilibrium</i>	<i>Gender-Critical Moment</i>
Mbok Delima lives happily by planting and harvesting rice, she has magic jarit that help her plant and harvest rice quickly. She lives with her parents and two older brothers in the Tegaldlimo area of Banyuwangi	Panji Gimawang wants to get Mbok Delima's help to harvest rice in his vast rice fields	Delima is willing to help harvest rice in the Panji Gimawang rice field. Delima's two older brothers did not like this fact because they thought that Gimawang would only take advantage of Delima's magic jarit	Gimawang and Delima's two older brothers had a disagreement, but Mbok Delima and Gimawang managed to reach an agreement. Mbok Delima propose (initiative) to help Gimawang harvest his rice fields	Mbok Delima and Gimawang help each other to glorify rice as a strategic staple food and developing the better agriculture system	Delima insisted to oppose the brother's decision not to allow him to help Panji Gimawang	Delima express her opinion on how to end the conflict that occurred between her two brothers and Panji Gimawang
						Delima firmed when facing the quarrel between his two brothers and Panji Gimawang, which was caused by the negative assessment of his two brothers that Panji Gimawang would only use Delima's magic
						Delima offer to manage Panji Gimawang's rice field using her competency through magic jarit

The proposed narrative refinement stages and the establishment of new balances aim to encourage gender-fair storytelling. Key aspects include: (1) Emphasizing Delima's articulative negotiation skills with his brothers and Panji Gimawang; (2) Recognize him as a well-rounded scholar who is able to plant, harvest, and manage food resources; (3) Describe him as an autonomous individual who can make independent life choices, including marriage decisions; (4) Empowering him to be the central figure of his own story, emphasizing his intellectual and leadership qualities. The researcher offers new stages of improvement and balance to be critiqued in order to obtain a more gender-equitable storytelling in the perspective of GESI. The improvement does not highlight a physical dispute but rather an argument to get an agreement and features the figure of Delima who is fluent in speech and able to negotiate with his two brothers and Panji Gimawang. Folklore texts have the function of building an understanding of a particular ideology that is presented from generation to generation, so it is important to see who and how the speaker operates his perspective in storytelling (Hidayati, 2019; Yakubu, 2018; Mei, 2016; Nurhayati, 2019; Tucker, 2008).

Text is also not static material. The folklore text featuring the character of Delima comes from the story of Panji Gimawang, to become the main character of the story itself is sought by (1) Delima's strong narrative as a female scholar who has the ability to plant, harvest, and manage food and access; (2) the narrative of the Pomegranate who has the right to make her own life choices: helping others without fear and free to choose who her husband is; (3) the narrative of Delima who is able to empower herself and her community so that she becomes the main character of her own story. The rearranged narrative shifts the focus from stereotypical passive roles to active and empowered women's agency, in line with contemporary ideals of gender equality and social justice.

Conclusion

This study affirms that reinterpreting the Mbok Delima narrative within the Panji Gimawang folklore potentially enhance the representation of women in Southeast Asian folklore and heighten awareness of food security issues in ASEAN. By adopting a GESI approach, traditional stories potentially reconstructed to depict women as proactive agents in resource management and cultural identity formation. Such reinterpretations have significant implications for education, social policy, and women's empowerment, aligning with ASEAN's core values of inclusivity and diversity.

Culturally grounded educational initiatives that elevate women's roles in folklore can foster greater gender awareness among younger generations and deepen appreciation for local wisdom. Furthermore, recognizing women's contributions to agriculture and food security in policy discourse is essential. Mbok Delima, as a symbol of food sovereignty, can serve as an advocacy figure for policies favoring women farmers at national and regional levels. This study suggests that future research endeavors should systematically investigate the reinterpretation possibilities within Southeast Asian folklore narratives. Such scholarly examination may yield valuable insights for advancing gender equality initiatives and strengthening food security frameworks. Moreover, this approach has the potential to contribute significantly to the development of a more inclusive and resilient cultural landscape, thereby enriching both academic discourse and practical applications in the ASEAN context.

Declarations

- Author contribution** : Ari Ambarwati was responsible for the entire research project. She also led the writing of the manuscript and the collaboration with the second author. Frida Siswiyanti participated in the data collection and transcription. Khoirul Muttaqin involved in analysis and revised the manuscript. The all authors approved the final manuscript.
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- Conflict of interest** : All authors declare that they have no competing interests.
- Ethics Approval** : Information on Ethics Approval and informed consent statements are required for all articles published in BAHASTRA since 2025.
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