



RESEARCH ARTICLE



CRITICAL DISCOURSE IN THE FOLKTALE 'MALIN KUNDANG': AN ANALYSIS OF MYTHOLOGY AND POWER IN MINANGKABAU CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

Critical Discourse in the Malin Kundang Folktale: An Analysis of Mythology and Power in Minangkabau Culture. This study aims to analyze power relations, the naturalization of values, and the construction of mythology in the Malin Kundang folktale. The study uses a qualitative approach with a Critical Discourse Analysis design that combines the perspectives of power, discourse and mythological theory. The data in the form of story texts are analyzed through stages of reduction, categorization, and interpretation of narratives that represent mother, child relations and symbols of punishment. The results of the study indicate that disobedience is constructed gradually through changes in social status and identity conflicts; the mother's authority is legitimized as the moral center of the family; and the transformation into stone functions as a mythologization mechanism that naturalizes the norm of obedience. The conclusion of the study confirms that folktales act as discursive practices that reproduce power relations and shape moral subjects in Minangkabau culture.

Introduction

Folktales are an important part of oral tradition, serving as a medium for transmitting a society's values, norms, and cultural identity. In the context of Indonesian society, folktales serve not only as a means of entertainment but also as instruments for moral education and character building. Through intergenerational transmission, traditional narratives contribute to building collective consciousness while strengthening the value systems that exist and thrive within society (Sibarani, 2018; Endraswara 2024).

One popular folktale in Indonesian cultural heritage is Malin Kundang, originating from the Minangkabau tradition. This story is generally understood as a story about the consequences of a child's disobedience to his mother and is often used to instill the values of obedience and respect for parents. Various studies have shown that folktales have a strategic function in character education, cultural preservation, and the formation of social morality (Ariani and Sulistyorini, 2025). However, the interpretations that have developed so far tend to be normative and pedagogical, thus neglecting the ideological dimensions and power relations at work behind these narratives.

In the context of Minangkabau culture, the story of Malin Kundang cannot be separated from its matrilineal social structure. This system places descent through the mother's side, thus ensuring that women hold a strategic position as guardians of the lineage, managers of heirlooms, and centers of moral authority within the family, Malinowsky in (Fitriana and Riau, 2018). Furthermore, the Minangkabau people also recognize the tradition of migration, which is considered a way to enhance family prestige and status. They believe that migration can transform one's social life (Fakhrina, 2017). Thus, the conflict between success abroad and the moral obligation to respect and serve one's

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mother forms the socio-cultural foundation that frames the main conflict in the Malin Kundang narrative.

From a contemporary cultural studies perspective, texts are viewed as social practices that are not neutral but rather imbued with ideological interests and power relations. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) positions language and narrative as media that shape social reality while simultaneously reproducing certain structures of domination (Wodak, 2024; Machin and Mayr 2023). This approach is relevant to the study of folklore because cultural narratives function as symbolic mechanisms that naturalize values and norms, thus accepting them as natural truths in social life.

The AWK framework in this study is developed through Michel Foucault's power-discourse perspective and Roland Barthes's concept of mythology. Foucault views discourse as a practice that produces knowledge and regulates power relations through the process of normalization and the formation of social subjects (Keller, 2017; Mills and others, 2022). Meanwhile, Barthes (Allen, 2021) explains that myth functions as a second-order sign system that transforms social constructions into something that appears natural and unquestionable. In folklore, supernatural elements such as curses can be understood as mythological mechanisms that strengthen the legitimacy of social norms.

Several previous studies have examined the story of Malin Kundang from various perspectives, including narrative structure analysis, symbolic studies, moral values, and the function of character education in cultural and learning contexts (Vavalin, and others 2025; (Ramadhan, and others, 2022; (Helmanto and Muttaqin, 2025). Other studies position this legend as a medium for internalizing cultural values and local wisdom, which serve to shape adherence to Minangkabau social norms (Putriza, Adriany, and Yulindrasari 2024). However, studies specifically integrating Critical Discourse Analysis with perspectives of power and mythology to uncover how this story functions as a mechanism for producing meaning and legitimizing ideology are still relatively limited. Most research still positions folklore as a reflection of cultural values, not as a discursive practice that plays a role in reproducing power relations and social structures within society.

Based on this situation, there is a research gap that needs to be filled: studies that view folklore as a discursive practice that naturalizes values of obedience, family hierarchy, and moral authority through mythological mechanisms. Analysis that links mythology to power relations is crucial for understanding how cultural narratives shape social consciousness and maintain value systems within Minangkabau society.

This study aims to analyze critical discourse in the Malin Kundang folktale using the perspectives of Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes. Specifically, this study examines (1) the power relations reproduced through narrative in the context of Minangkabau culture, (2) the forms of naturalization of values and ideology, and (3) the construction of mythology in the text. The results of this study are expected to provide theoretical contributions to the development of studies on cultural discourse and oral literature, as well as enrich critical perspectives in understanding the ideological function of folktales.

Materials and Methods

This research uses a qualitative approach with a text analysis design within the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework to uncover the construction of meaning, ideology, and power relations in the Malin Kundang folktale. The analytical framework integrates Michel Foucault's power-discourse perspective and Roland Barthes's mythological theory. Foucault's perspective is used to examine the construction of norms of obedience and the legitimacy of authority, while Barthes's is used to identify sign systems and myths as mechanisms for the naturalization of cultural values.

The data source is the text "Malin Kundang," taken from the book *Cerita Asli Nusantara*, written by Ayu (2015). The units of analysis include narratives and dialogues representing mother-child relationships, normative statements, and mythological symbols such as curses and transformation into stone. Data were collected through documentation studies and intensive reading, with the researcher as the primary instrument, using analytical guidelines based on the concepts of Foucault and Barthes.

The analysis was conducted interpretively through reduction, categorization, and interpretation. Discursive analysis reveals the construction of the “disobedient child” and the legitimacy of parental power, while semiological analysis interprets the denotative and connotative meanings and the function of myth as a naturalization of the value of obedience. Data validity is maintained through repeated readings and theoretical triangulation.

Results and Discussion

The results of this study describe the discourse construction, power relation patterns, and mythologization mechanisms in the Malin Kundang folktale. Analysis was conducted on seven text excerpts selected based on their relevance to the research focus and representing the main narrative structure that builds power relations and mythology in the text. Based on the analysis results, three main patterns were found, namely (1) the construction of the discourse of disobedience, (2) the legitimacy of maternal authority, and (3) the construction of the mythology of punishment.

No	Text Quotes	Discourse Findings	Discourse Patterns
1	“His mother worked hard to meet their living needs.”	Figure of sacrifice	Legitimacy Maternal Authority
2	“Malin asked for permission to travel to change his fate..”	Social mobility	Discourse Construction Disobedience
3	“Malin has become a wealthy merchant.”	Transformation of social status	Discourse Construction Disobedience
4	“Malin felt ashamed to see his poor mother.”	Class identity conflict	Discourse Construction Disobedience
5	“Malin disowned his mother and drove her away.”	Disobedient child Construction	Discourse Construction Disobedience
6	“His mother prayed that her son would be punished.”	Mother's moral authority	Legitimacy Maternal Authority
7	“Malin turned into stone.”	Mythologizing punishment	Mythologizing punishment

Table 1. Discourse Patterns in the Malin Kundang Story

Based on the table, the three discourse patterns are systematically arranged in the narrative flow of the story. The pattern of constructing the discourse of disobedience is seen through a series of events starting from the character's social mobility, the emergence of identity conflict, and the act of rejecting the mother. The pattern of legitimizing maternal authority is seen through the representation of the mother as a sacrificial figure and determiner of the direction of consequences in the story. The pattern of mythologizing punishment is manifested through the event of the character's transformation into stone as the end of the conflict. Overall, the narrative structure moves from changes in social status to violations of family relationships and is resolved through mythological punishment that affirms family norms in the context of Minangkabau culture.

Discourse Construction of Disobedience

The first pattern shows that the identity of the “disobedient child” does not emerge suddenly, but is rather gradually produced through a series of narrative events. The initial stage is marked by social mobility through migration (“Malin asked permission to migrate to change his fate”) and a transformation in economic status (“Malin has become a wealthy merchant”). At this stage, the text constructs an implicit opposition between economic success and genealogical loyalty.

Conflict arises when the change in social status creates a symbolic distance between Malin and his mother (“Malin felt ashamed to see his mother poor”). This shame serves as a marker of identity shift, from a child bound by the family structure to a subject who identifies himself through a new

social status. The final stage is demonstrated through an explicit act of rejection (“Malin disowned his mother and drove her away”), which solidifies the character's position in the deviant category. This sequence demonstrates that the text systematically produces the subject of the “disobedient child” through a discursive opposition between obedience and deviance. The deviant identity is constructed not only through actions but also through the arrangement of events that lead the reader to certain moral conclusions.

Legitimation of Maternal Authority

The second pattern demonstrates how the text constructs the mother as the center of moral authority. The representation of the mother as a sacrificial figure ("Her mother works hard to provide for their needs") not only reflects social conditions but also places the mother in a position of symbolic legitimacy. Sacrifice becomes the moral foundation that grants authority within the family's power relations. This legitimacy reaches its peak when the mother prays for her child's punishment. At this point, the mother's voice becomes a mechanism that determines the narrative's direction. Prayer is not positioned as a mere emotional expression, but as an act with performative power within the story's structure. Maternal authority thus functions as a source of moral truth that determines the ultimate consequences. This structure demonstrates that power relations in the text operate through symbolic legitimacy, not physical violence. Power is present in the form of recognition of the mother's authority as the center of norms and source of moral validation within the family system. Thus, compliance is not forced directly, but is internalized as a moral obligation that is considered natural and cannot be questioned.

The Mythological Construction of Punishment

The third pattern is evident in the event of Malin's transformation into stone. Narratively, this event resolves the conflict. However, discursively, this transformation shifts social conflict into a permanent symbol. Punishment is presented not as a normal social sanction, but as an absolute, supernatural consequence. At the level of meaning, the stone functions as a symbol of the cessation of mobility, rigidity, and powerlessness. This transformation closes off the possibility of negotiation or reconciliation, thus positioning disobedience as a violation that leads to permanent destruction. Thus, the mythologization of punishment operates as a symbolic mechanism that reinforces norms of obedience through the effects of finality and moral absolutism.

Discussion

Research findings indicate that disobedience in the text of Malin Kundang does not appear as a neutral moral fact, but rather as a discursive construction gradually constructed through changes in social status, identity conflicts, and the rejection of family relationships. Within the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis, narrative functions as a mechanism for subject production, placing characters within specific moral categories. Social mobility through migration is followed by the emergence of social distance and shame towards the mother, which then culminates in the rejection of kinship relations. This sequence shapes the identity of the "dubious child" as a deviant category born from violations of family norms. Thus, this identity is not simply an ethical label, but rather the result of a discursive process that regulates the boundaries of legitimate and illegitimate behavior within the Minangkabau social structure.

From Foucault's perspective, discourse not only represents reality but also produces truth through what is known as a regime of truth. The story of Malin Kundang establishes a normative truth about a child's obedience to the mother as absolute and unquestionable. Through the opposition between obedience and deviance, the text produces moral knowledge that functions as a tool for social regulation. These narratives do not operate through direct coercion, but rather through normalization, the process of internalizing norms so that subjects self-police. Thus, folklore can be understood as a symbolic mechanism that disciplines behavior through the production of fear, guilt, and moral obligation.

The following findings show that the mother is represented not only as a nurturing figure, but as a center of moral authority with the legitimacy to determine the story's final consequences. The mother's prayer becomes a turning point that directs the narrative reality, so that her authority functions as a source of moral truth. Within Foucault's framework of knowledge-power relations, this legitimacy indicates that power works productively through social recognition of certain authorities. The mother's position as the center of lineage in the Minangkabau matrilineal system (as cited by Malinowsky in Fitriana and Riau 2018) strengthens her symbolic power. The tradition of migration (Fakhrina 2017), which encourages male social mobility, does not eliminate the obligation to the mother as a source of genealogical identity. Thus, the conflict in the story represents the tension between economic mobility and customary structures, which is then resolved through the reaffirmation of maternal authority as the center of moral order.

The event of Malin's transformation into stone demonstrates the mechanism of mythologization in Barthes's sense. At the denotative level, the stone is a hard, lifeless physical object. At the connotative level, the stone represents punishment, rigidity, and the cessation of social mobility. At the mythical level (second-order signification), the stone becomes a symbol of the absolute moral truth that disobedience leads to permanent destruction. Through this process, the social construction of filial piety is transformed into a symbolic law that appears natural and ahistorical. Myth works by erasing the social context of conflict, such as class dynamics and social mobility, and replacing it with a universal moral narrative that appears to apply across time.

When read integratively, the myth in this story functions as a discursive technology of power. From a Foucauldian perspective, power operates through the production of truth and normalization; from Barthes's perspective, myth naturalizes social constructions, making them seem normal. Thus, mythological punishment is not simply an element of folklore but a symbolic instrument that allows norms of obedience to be accepted without resistance. Folklore becomes a space for the reproduction of symbolic power that shapes subjects through the internalization of values and the formation of moral consciousness.

Unlike previous studies, these findings demonstrate that mythological elements have a concrete ideological function, namely affirming moral boundaries while maintaining social order. The novelty of this research lies in the simultaneous integration of power-discourse and mythological perspectives in reading folktales as discursive practices that produce subjects, legitimize authority, and naturalize norms. Theoretically, these findings strengthen the development of Critical Discourse Analysis in the study of oral literature by positioning texts as mechanisms for the production and reproduction of ideology within a local cultural context. Practically, a critical reading of folktales opens up space for reflection in literary studies, so that moral values are understood as social constructions that can be analyzed contextually and ideologically, rather than as completely neutral truths.

Conclusions

This study aims to analyze power relations, forms of naturalized values, and mythological constructions in the Malin Kundang folktale through the perspectives of Michel Foucault's power-discourse and Roland Barthes' mythology. Based on an analysis of seven key quotations representing the main narrative structure, three substantive findings were identified.

First, disobedience is discursively constructed through stages of social mobility, class identity conflict, and the rejection of mother-child relations, which systematically shape the subject category of the "dubious child" as a deviant identity. Second, the text legitimizes maternal authority through the representation of the mother as a sacrificial figure and the center of moral authority who determines the story's final consequences. Thus, power operates symbolically through the normalization of obedience in the context of Minangkabau matrilineal culture. Third, the event of the character's transformation into stone functions as a mythological mechanism that naturalizes the norm of obedience by presenting supernatural punishment as an absolute and non-negotiable consequence. These findings demonstrate that folktales not only reflect cultural values but also

function as discursive practices that produce moral subjects, reproduce power relations, and affirm social order through the naturalization of ideology.

Based on these results, further research is recommended to expand the data corpus by comparing several versions of the Malin Kundang text or other Minangkabau folktales to identify variations in discourse construction and mythologization patterns in different social contexts. Furthermore, interdisciplinary studies integrating discourse analysis with ethnography or reader reception studies are needed to explore how the narrative is internalized in contemporary social practices. A cross-cultural comparative approach could also be undertaken to examine whether patterns of legitimizing authority and mythologizing punishment have similar characteristics in the oral traditions of other societies.

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