

# Using the Timun Mas Folktale to Explore the Depiction of Women in Language Learning: Perspectives from Filipino Students

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## Abstract

This study examines how Filipino university students perceive the role of women in their culture and their views on the depiction of women in the Indonesian folktale Timun Mas. Studies that explore how students from one country interpret gender roles in traditional stories of another country remain limited, particularly in Southeast Asia. This study addresses that gap by investigating how Filipino students interpret female characters in Timun Mas, providing insight into how cultural narratives influence cross-border perceptions of women. Fifteen students from Mariano Marcos State University participated via open-ended questionnaires. Using a qualitative descriptive method, data were analyzed through Miles and Huberman's interactive model. The findings revealed four major themes: cultural perception, women's portrayal in folktales, women's resistance, and literary reflection. Many Filipino students still associate women with traditional domestic roles, yet an increasing recognition of female strength and independence is evident. The study also demonstrates how a foreign folktale, when used in an English learning context, can prompt cross-cultural dialogue and critical reflection on gender.

**Keywords:** Depiction of Women, Folktale, Language Learning, Timun Mas

## INTRODUCTION

Folklore represents a vital component of a region's cultural heritage. Beyond its narrative richness, folklore plays a pivotal educational role. As Nopasari, Rozak, and Wiradinata (2023) highlight, folklore embodies not only traditions but also values, principles, and behaviors that contribute meaningfully to human development. Folklore takes many forms, such as music, rituals, dance, and especially folktales which offer significant opportunities for cultural and educational engagement. This study narrows its focus to folktales, a specific type of folklore that carries deep pedagogical and cultural implications. Karmakar (2025) emphasizes that folktales contain indigenous wisdom about the human-nature relationship and promote sustainable development through cultural storytelling. Similarly, Prawiyogi (2025) asserts that engaging with local folktales enhances cultural identity and belonging, which are essential in shaping learners' self-concept and fostering meaningful educational experiences.

In educational contexts, especially within language learning, folktales have proven to be powerful tools for transmitting not only language but also cultural values and social norms. Suwandi (2025) notes that folktales function as character-building instruments by embedding moral values, making them relevant for modern educational settings. Papadopoulos, Isaak, and Shin (2021) further demonstrate the utility of folktales in foreign language education by fostering multicultural awareness and persuasive communication strategies. However, many such studies tend to center on European folktales and overlook the nuanced depiction of gender within non-Western narratives.

A folktale, as a traditional narrative passed orally across generations, frequently serves to entertain, teach, or preserve cultural norms, including those related to gender. According to Jones et al. (2023), folktales often reflect dominant societal norms, including traditional gender roles, where men are portrayed as strong and heroic, while women are typically relegated to nurturing or passive roles. Morales Rodríguez and Lopez-Figueroa (2024) argue that female characters in media, including folktales, are frequently portrayed through stereotypical lenses, usually as caregivers or as secondary to male protagonists. Andalas and Bhakti (2022) further explain that women in traditional stories are often confined to domestic roles or are symbolically used in the dynamics of male power, reinforcing patriarchal structures. Inggs (2021) similarly observes that female characters are marginalized, rarely allowed active agency, and are often represented as voiceless figures.

However, some folktales offer more empowered and progressive portrayals of women, challenging dominant gender stereotypes. One such example is the Indonesian folktale *Timun Mas*, which centers on a young girl who courageously defends herself and her family from supernatural threats. Unlike many traditional tales that frame female characters as passive or dependent, *Timun Mas* and her mother are central agents in the story, actively shaping their fate. This dual depiction of women as both vulnerable and strong, provides a rich site for linguistic and cultural exploration, particularly in the realm of gender representation.

This study employs the *Timun Mas* folktale as a text in English to examine how learners perceive and interpret gender roles embedded in non-Western narratives. The version of the folktale used in this study was translated into English to make it accessible to the participants, Filipino university students, allowing them to engage with the story both linguistically and culturally. The aim is not only to understand how they interpret the female characters within the *Timun Mas* narrative but also to explore their perspectives on gender roles as shaped by their own cultural experiences. Previous research on *Timun Mas* has generally focused on either moral values (e.g., Nanda et al., 2021) or comparative narrative structures (e.g., Masofa & Sumarsono, 2021), without closely examining gender representations. For example, Nanda et al. (2021) identified eight core moral values in *Timun Mas*, such as honesty, independence, and hard work, while Masofa and Sumarsono (2021) compared *Timun Mas* with *Beauty and the Beast*, emphasizing thematic similarities and cultural differences. These studies, while valuable, do not address the gender dynamics present in the folktale.

This research offers a fresh contribution by situating the analysis within the framework of gender representation in language learning, using the *Timun Mas* folktale as a culturally situated narrative. The study has two primary objectives: first, to investigate how Filipino students perceive the role of women within their own cultural frameworks; and second, to analyze how they interpret the representation of female characters in the Indonesian folktale *Timun Mas* when introduced through the medium of English. By exploring how gender is portrayed and interpreted across cultural lines, this study aims to enrich our understanding of folktales not only as literary texts but also as educational tools that facilitate critical language learning, intercultural dialogue, and gender awareness. Through the perspectives of Filipino students, this research contributes to a more inclusive and reflective approach to language education, one that embraces the intersections of culture, language, and gender in the global classroom.

## METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive method within a language education and gender representation framework, using a perception study approach. This design is appropriate for capturing the nuanced understandings of learners as they engage with literary texts in English. As emphasized by Furidha (2023), qualitative descriptive research is well-suited for exploring

participants' subjective experiences and interpretive meanings, particularly in contexts that do not rely on statistical generalization but instead prioritize depth and richness of data.

The perception study approach was selected to investigate how Filipino students interpret the depiction of women in the Timun Mas folktale and how these interpretations reflect or contrast with their own cultural views on gender. Given that language learning often involves interaction with cultural and ideological content embedded in texts, this approach allows for an exploration of how learners construct meaning through language when engaging with narratives from outside their cultural context. It also supports an analysis of how English, as the medium of instruction and response, becomes a tool for articulating intercultural understanding and gender perspectives. Data were collected using an open-ended questionnaire, designed to encourage reflective and elaborative responses regarding the students' interpretations of female characters in the folktale. The questionnaire was administered to 15 Filipino students enrolled in the Bachelor of Secondary Education (BSEd) Major in English program at Mariano Marcos State University. These students were chosen due to their academic background in English language and literature, which ensured familiarity with analyzing texts from both linguistic and cultural perspectives. Their engagement with multicultural narratives in English provided a relevant foundation for responding to the Timun Mas folktale, which had been translated into English for this study.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Results

The responses from 15 Filipino university students were analyzed and grouped into four key themes: Cultural Perception, Depiction of Women in Folktales, Women's Resistance, and Literary Reflection. These themes were derived from answers to six open-ended questions about their interpretations and reflections on the folktale Timun Mas, especially concerning the depiction of women. Each participant is referred to using the codes S1 to S15.

### Cultural Perception

Responses to the question about women's roles in Filipino culture revealed a strong presence of traditional gender expectations. Many students emphasized domesticity, care, and sacrifice as defining attributes of women. A recurring phrase used was *ilaw ng tahanan* ("light of the home"), signifying a woman's central, nurturing role within the household.

"Women are frequently portrayed as caring, selfless, and focused on their families. The 'ilaw ng tahanan' reflects the way they are viewed." (S9)

Other responses included descriptions such as "caretaker" (S11), "focused on household duties" (S6), and "emotional pillar" (S10). Some also noted submissiveness:

"Women are often submissive, meek, and perceived as inferior to men." (S5)

However, some students highlighted more progressive roles:

"Through various revolutionary efforts, the viewpoint of women today has shifted... allowing women to thrive in all aspects without constraints." (S12)

"Now we have women who are lawyers, engineers, presidents. They are more than just caregivers." (S14)

**Table 1.** Representations of Women in Filipino Culture

Category	Number of Students	Students Code
Women as Nurturing/Family Oriented	8	S1, S4, S6, S7, S8, S9, S10, S11
Women as submissive or Traditional Role	4	S2, S5, S13, S15
Women as involving/empowered	3	S3, S12, S14

### Depiction of Women in Folktales

When comparing Timun Mas to Filipino folktales, most students noted a significant difference. Timun Mas was seen as autonomous, brave, and clever.

“Timun Mas is depicted as active and resourceful, unlike Filipino women in folktales.” (S8)

“She uses cleverness and bravery to overcome an awful opponent... taking charge of her own destiny.” (S9)

A popular comparison was made with Maria Makiling:

“Maria Makiling is powerful, but she mostly observes from afar. Timun Mas actually fights.” (S4)

**Table 2.** Comparison between Timun Mas and Filipino Folktales

Category	Number of Students	Students Code
Timun Mas is more empowered	9	S3, S5, S8, S9, S10, S12, S13, S14, S15
Both portray similarity	4	S1, S4, S6, S11
Mixed/unclear answer	2	S2, S7

### Women's Resistance

Students interpreted Timun Mas as a figure of resistance. Eleven of the fifteen described her as stronger than, or equal to, male characters, not physically, but mentally and emotionally.

“Timun Mas's strength isn't physical; it's her cleverness and courage.” (S8)

“She stood firm and faced her own trials with strength.” (S1)

Another perspectives from students that also important is:

“She was only able to escape because of the magical tools. Without them, she was powerless.” (S15)

They also emphasized the strength of Timun Mas’s mother:

“Even her adoptive mother demonstrates strength by shielding her and preparing her for the journey.” (S9)

“She’s not just a side character. She takes real risks for her daughter.” (S13)

**Table 3.** Portrayal of Female Strength in Timun Mas

Category	Number of Students	Students Code
Woman portrayed as stronger	11	S1, S2, S3, S4, S8, S9, S10, S11, S12, S13, S14
Equal strength or not directly compared	2	S5, S6
Woman portrayed as weaker	2	S7, S15

## Literary Reflection

All 15 respondents stated that they gained cultural insight from reading Timun Mas.

“I gained insight into Indonesian culture, especially its values around family, spirituality, and the symbolic use of nature.” (S15)

“The folktale showed me that Indonesia also had an amazing story about how women are strong and brave.” (S4)

**Table 4.** Cultural Insights Gained from the Story

Category	Number of Students	Students Code
Yes, I gained insight	15	S1 to S15

Students also drew relevance to contemporary women:

“Like Timun Mas and her mother, modern women are brave, wise, and capable of facing challenges.” (S10)

“They are not just women, they are WOMEN who also have a purpose like men.” (S1)

## Discussion

### Gender Representations and Evolving Perspectives

The “Cultural Perception” theme reflects an enduring influence of traditional values, particularly the idea of women as *ilaw ng tahanan*. This supports prior findings (Su et al., 2020)

that traditional societies often view women primarily through their familial roles. However, the presence of alternative, empowered representations among the participants suggests a cultural shift toward more egalitarian norms, particularly among younger generations exposed to global discourses on gender equality.

From a language learning standpoint, this also indicates the learners' ability to articulate complex cultural ideas in English, showing not only linguistic competence but also sociocultural awareness, two key goals of communicative and intercultural language teaching (Byram, 1997).

### **Folktales as Gendered Texts**

In the "Depiction of Women in Folktales" theme, the admiration for Timun Mas as an active heroine aligns with Sayuti's (2020) claim that literary texts are sites of identity negotiation. By contrasting Timun Mas with Maria Makiling, students are actively analyzing how femininity is differently constructed in regional narratives, enhancing their critical literacy.

This process is important in second language acquisition, where literary texts are used not only to develop reading and interpretation skills but also to expand learners' worldview (Kramsch, 1993). Students are engaging with comparative literary analysis, a higher-order skill that involves both language and critical thinking.

### **Gender Performativity and Resistance**

Students' interpretations of Timun Mas as an agent of resistance support Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity. Rather than conforming to a passive, feminine archetype, Timun Mas enacts agency, courage, and decision-making, disrupting gender norms. Her journey through challenging terrain can also be seen through Singh's (2022) framework of space as an ideological battleground one where female protagonists reclaim authority.

Furthermore, such discussions foster gender-sensitive learning environments. By analyzing how language in the folktale frames female action, students are learning how discourse constructs reality a central tenet of critical discourse analysis.

### **Literature and Intercultural Learning**

Under the "Literary Reflection" theme, the fact that all respondents gained cultural insight confirms literature's role as a bridge for intercultural understanding. Bruner's (1957) constructivist theory supports this, asserting that learners build meaning from stories based on their existing schemas. Students' recognition of cultural values and gender ideologies in Timun Mas demonstrates that folktales can function as effective educational tools in language classes, especially when used to prompt reflective discussions.

This also supports Kramsch's (2009) idea that language learning is inseparable from cultural interpretation. Reading Timun Mas did not only teach students about Indonesia, it also encouraged them to reflect on their own culture and gender ideologies.

### **Pedagogical Implications**

The integration of local or regional folktales like Timun Mas into language learning has significant pedagogical value. First, it nurtures reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition. Second, it enhances intercultural competence and gender awareness. Third, it encourages learners to discuss identity, power, and representation in a second language, a crucial skill in today's globalized world.



As such, folktales should not be limited to heritage preservation; they can be transformative texts for critical pedagogy. Teachers can leverage them to open conversations about language, gender, and culture, while developing students' linguistic skills and critical thinking.

## CONCLUSION

This research explored the perspectives of 15 Filipino university students regarding the depiction of women in the Timun Mas folktale. Using the interactive data analysis model by Miles and Huberman, four key themes emerged from the participants' responses. First, in terms of cultural perception, students recognized that women in Filipino society are traditionally seen as nurturing, moral guides, and household figures. However, some responses also acknowledged evolving views toward gender equality, indicating that notions of women's roles are in transition. Second, in the depiction of women in folktales, most students considered Timun Mas as an empowered and independent character, contrasting with many Filipino folktale heroines who tend to be portrayed as passive or secondary. This difference highlights how Timun Mas serves as a rare example of a female protagonist who drives her own narrative. Third, regarding women's resistance, the students praised Timun Mas's bravery, resourcefulness, and autonomy. Even though she used tools provided by others, they saw her actions as deliberate and courageous. Her characterization challenges conventional gender norms often found in traditional literature, presenting her as a symbol of female agency. Fourth, through literary reflection, all participants agreed that Timun Mas offered valuable insights into Indonesian values, such as bravery, respect for elders, and harmony with nature, demonstrating the power of folktales as cultural bridges.

Overall, this study concludes that Timun Mas provides a progressive and empowering depiction of female strength when viewed through a cross-cultural lens. The character of Timun Mas stands out as a symbol of resilience, agency, and courage, defying the passive or secondary roles often assigned to women in traditional narratives. Her independence and refusal to rely on male saviors resonated strongly with Filipino students, who interpreted her actions as reflective of contemporary values around gender equality and self-determination. Additionally, the cultural elements embedded in the story offered students meaningful insights into Indonesian traditions.

This suggests that folktales like Timun Mas serve not only as cultural artifacts but also as powerful educational tools for promoting intercultural understanding and critical gender awareness. Future research could involve a larger, more diverse population from various Southeast Asian countries to gain broader perspectives. Comparative studies that examine multiple folktales across cultures could also deepen our understanding of how gender roles are reinforced, challenged, or transformed in traditional storytelling, especially when interpreted by younger generations in academic contexts.

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