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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Beyond guardians of tradition: Riau Malay women's resilience in contemporary short stories

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ABSTRACT
Urban expansion, language shift, and environmental degradation threaten Riau Malay cultural continuity, yet literary representations of women's role in this process remain understudied. This study examines how contemporary short stories represent Riau Malay women's resilience in relation to tradition preservation. Using a qualitative descriptive-interpretive design, it applies Sara Mills' feminist critical discourse analysis, operationalized through subject–object positions, narrative voice and focalization, and reader positioning, combined with concepts of resilience, agency, and cultural resilience. The data are narrative units from six purposively selected short stories published in Riau online literary platforms (2020–2024), featuring a central Malay woman, adversity, and a cultural practice. These were coded, classified, and interpreted through theoretical triangulation. Four patterns emerge. First, women's resilience takes emotional, spiritual, adaptive, and ecological-cultural forms, though some endurance amounts to coerced compliance. Second, women act as cultural transmitters, ritual bearers, and keepers of ecological-cultural memory, though one story locates preservation in the community. Third, the narratives make women central and guide readers toward empathy, yet objectify them under familial and customary authority. Fourth, tradition persists through negotiated adaptation, while river and forest knowledge remains vulnerable to environmental change. Distinguishing resilience from compliance and negotiation, the study moves beyond viewing women as mere guardians of tradition, offering a framework linking feminist critical discourse analysis and cultural sustainability for culturally responsive literature learning.

Keywords: cultural resilience; feminist critical discourse analysis; Riau Malay women; tradition preservation; women's resilience.

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INTRODUCTION

The Riau Malay community possesses a rich heritage of traditions, values, and local wisdom that underpins its collective identity. This identity is expressed through *pantun*, *syair*, *gurindam*, marriage customs, oral traditions, and *tunjuk ajar Melayu*, an ethical code governing family and community life. After the New Order era, it was actively renegotiated through cultural policy, customary institutions, and public symbols (Darmawan, 2021; Rafi et al., 2020). Tradition in Riau is thus not merely a legacy of the past but a resource through which the community defines itself.

This continuity is under visible pressure. In megapolitan Pekanbaru, Malay traditions compete with global popular culture, and everyday speech increasingly mixes Malay with other languages (Herlinda, 2022; Rahmah et al., 2025). The pressure is ecological as well. The Siak River, the historical backbone of Malay riverine life, was still classified as medium to heavily contaminated in 2018–2020 (Hasibuan et al., 2022). Meanwhile, Riau lost about 4.63 million hectares of forest between 1990 and 2020 as oil palm expanded six-fold (Numata et al., 2022). When rivers and forests deteriorate, the practices and knowledge attached to them lose their material ground. Preserving tradition therefore requires sustaining language, meaning, ecological knowledge, and the social relations through which they are passed on.

Women occupy a significant yet ambivalent position in this process. Malay women frequently teach manners, maintain household rituals, and transmit knowledge about health and childhood. Female healers on Penyengat Island sustain local medicinal knowledge (Azzahra & Rokis, 2025), and birth-related beliefs in Riau Malay families are transmitted largely through mothers (Erni & Ulya, 2025). However, celebrating women as "guardians of tradition" can naturalize their burden and obscure the constraints under which they act. Concepts are therefore needed that distinguish strength, endurance, and choice.

This study distinguishes women's resilience from agency, negotiation, and compliance. Women's resilience is the capacity to maintain or restore functioning and meaning amid adversity by drawing on personal, family, and community resources (Masten, 2018). It must not be equated with absorbing injustice, as resilience can turn into a demand that women endure ever more pressure. Agency is the capacity to define goals and act upon them (Kabeer, 1999). In customary and religious settings, it may involve inhabiting norms reflexively rather than resisting them (Mahmood, 2005).

Negotiation refers to bargaining for space within patriarchal arrangements (Kandiyoti, 1988), whereas compliance denotes conformity without evidence of choice. These responses

relate to cultural resilience, a community's capacity to sustain its identity by allowing heritage to change in form while keeping its meaning (Holtorf, 2018). Women's resilience becomes part of cultural resilience when their adaptive practices transmit or reinterpret cultural knowledge for the next generation. It becomes agency only when the text shows the woman herself shaping the outcome.

Literary texts are a privileged site for observing these relations because representation produces meaning rather than simply mirroring reality. Sara Mills (1995, 1997) examines how texts allocate subject and object positions, whose eyes events are seen through, and how readers are led to accept an interpretation as natural. To avoid conflating feminist stylistics with critical discourse analysis, this study uses Mills' discourse-level positions as its framework. Her stylistic tools, such as naming, evaluative lexis, and focalization, serve as textual evidence for those positions.

Previous research falls into four clusters. The first comprises feminist literary studies that examine women affirming themselves against family pressure (Aulia & Efendi, 2025) or acting collectively to protect other women (Burhanuddin & Ahmadi, 2024). These studies, however, largely equate agency with resistance and leave little room for agency within tradition. The second cluster applies Mills' model to identify women as objectified or resisting subjects (Dwitaningsih et al., 2024). Even in studies of custom, men and *adat* appear as dominant subjects and women as submissive objects (Fatihrahma et al., 2025). Such studies tend to treat subject and object as a binary.

The third cluster links women and the environment, reading rivers as sites of women's resistance (Dewi, 2020) or identifying ecological values in short stories (Ali & Bahruddin, 2024). Yet neither examines how ecological knowledge is transmitted as part of a specific cultural identity. The fourth cluster comprises cultural studies of Riau Malay society (Rahmah et al., 2025; Ramli et al., 2025), which provide rich context but do not analyze literary representation. Taken together, these studies have not yet examined in an integrated way how women's resilience, their textual positioning, and cultural sustainability are linked in Riau Malay literature.

The novelty of this study lies in integrating Sara Mills' feminist critical discourse analysis with the perspectives of women's resilience and cultural sustainability. It treats women neither as victims of patriarchy nor as idealized custodians of custom. Instead, it asks how texts construct women's capacity to endure, adapt, negotiate, and transmit culture, and at what cost. It also extends the analysis to the ecological dimension of tradition, namely women's relations with rivers, forests, and local knowledge. Six contemporary short stories

were selected because each places a Malay woman at the narrative center, depicts her facing adversity, and features an identifiable Malay cultural practice. Together, they cover life-cycle ritual, marriage custom, everyday norms, communal religious practice, riverine knowledge, and forest taboos. The full criteria are detailed in the Method section.

This study addresses three questions: (1) how are Riau Malay women's resilience and its limits represented in contemporary short stories; (2) how do female characters transmit, reproduce, and negotiate Malay traditions; and (3) how do the narratives position women as subjects and objects and guide readers' interpretations? Theoretically, the study offers an operational framework linking feminist critical discourse analysis with resilience and cultural sustainability. It also proposes a distinction between resilience, compliance, negotiation, and agency applicable to other regional literatures. Practically, it gives teachers of Indonesian language and literature a lens for culturally responsive literature learning that uses local short stories to build cultural literacy and critical gender awareness.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive-interpretive design. A qualitative approach was chosen because the study seeks to interpret how meanings and social positions are constructed through language in literary texts, rather than to measure variables (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The data were six contemporary short stories with a Riau Malay setting, published between 2020 and 2024: *Amak* by Tina Harianti (*Riau Pos*, 2024), on life-cycle ritual; *Pendar Zapin di Negeri Istana* by Listi Mora Rangkuti (*Riausastra.com*, 2020), on everyday norms; *Tepuk Tepung Tawar* by Rinanda Tesniana (*Riausastra.com*, 2022), on marriage custom; *Perempuan yang Terganggu Jiwanya oleh Sungai* by Joni Hendri (*Lamanriau.com*, 2022), on riverine ritual; *Bertegah* by Sausan Al Ward (*Riausastra.com*, 2023), on communal prayer; and *Orang-Orang Bunian* by M. Arif Al Husein (*Riausastra.com*, 2024), on forest taboos. The stories were selected purposively because each has a Riau Malay setting, a Malay woman as the central character, adversity that allows resilience to be observed, and an identifiable cultural practice. They also ensure maximum variation, as each represents a different domain of tradition and together they display contrasting responses, from agency to coerced compliance.

The researcher served as the primary instrument, assisted by data cards. Data were collected through documentation and the read-and-record technique. The unit of analysis was the narrative unit, namely a word, phrase, sentence, dialogue, or passage representing a female character's position, response to adversity, or relation to a cultural practice. Each

unit was coded into three categories aligned with the research questions. The first, Mills' positions (Mills, 1995, 1997), comprises four indicators. The subject position is marked when the woman speaks, acts as the grammatical agent, or focalizes events, whereas the object position is marked when she is spoken about, decided for, or evaluated by others. The narrator position is traced through narrative voice, focalization, naming, and evaluative lexis, while the reader position is traced through whose perspective the reader is aligned with, cues inviting empathy or judgment, and what the ending presents as natural. The second category, response to adversity, and the third, cultural work, are operationalized in Table 1, together with the six forms of resilience used to code each response.

Category	Code	Indicator
Form of resilience	Emotional	Grief or anxiety without abandoning social roles
	Spiritual	Crisis interpreted through prayer, *tawakal*, or worship
	Social	Endurance sustained by family or community
	Adaptive	Adjustment to new norms and rebuilding of the self
	Cultural	Performing or passing on a practice under pressure
	Ecological	Maintaining a practice tied to a damaged river or forest
Response to adversity	Resilience	Recovery without altering the source of pressure
	Negotiation	Room gained within norms, framed in community values
	Compliance	Conformity marked by coercion, with no evidence of choice
	Agency	The woman herself shapes the outcome
Cultural work	Transmission	Teaching, narrating, or prohibiting to the next generation
	Reproduction	Re-enacting a practice so that it stays alive
	Negotiation	Enacting a practice while contesting or adjusting it

Table 1. Analytical categories and indicators (Source: Developed by the authors based on Masten, 2018; Kabeer, 1999; Kandiyoti, 1988; UNESCO, 2003)

Data were analyzed through data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles et al., 2020) in five stages: (1) repeated reading; (2) segmentation of narrative units; (3) deductive coding using the three categories, supplemented by inductive codes; (4) classification and cross-story comparison; and (5) interpretation within the Riau Malay sociocultural context. Credibility was ensured through theoretical triangulation, in which each unit was read through three lenses: Mills' positions, resilience and agency, and cultural resilience. An interpretation was retained only when supported by textual evidence and consistent across at least two lenses. Endurance without evidence of choice was therefore classified as compliance rather than agency.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section answers the three research questions. The first subsection addresses how resilience and its limits are represented; the second and third address how female characters

transmit, reproduce, and negotiate tradition, including its ecological dimension; and the fourth addresses subject, object, narrator, and reader positions. A final subsection synthesizes the findings in relation to cultural resilience. All codes follow the indicators in Table 1.

Women's Resilience: Forms, Sources, and Limits

Table 2 maps the pressure each character faces, the resources available to her, and the form and category of her response. The pattern is consistent. Resilience in the full sense, recovering and sustaining one's roles without losing one's identity (Ahmed, 2017; Masten, 2018), appears where characters can draw on ritual, prayer, or community; where such resources are withheld, endurance narrows into compliance.

Story	Character	Pressure	Resources	Form of resilience	Response
Amak	Amak	Daughter's death after childbirth	Ritual, prayer, family	Emotional, spiritual, cultural	Resilience; agency
Bertegah	Bu Asih	Husband missing for four days	Communal prayer	Emotional, spiritual, social	Community-sustained resilience
Tepuk Tepung Tawar	Ara	Marriage forced by her parents	None; refusal silenced	Emotional (limited)	Compliance
Pendar Zapin di Negeri Istana	Sandra	Heartbreak, loss of mother, dress rules	Family, worship, Zapin	Adaptive, spiritual	Compliance to negotiation to agency
Perempuan yang Terganggu Jiwanya oleh Sungai	Roza	Polluted river, solitude, stigma	Charm verses, betel leaf	Cultural, ecological	Agency (symbolic resistance)
Orang-Orang Bunian	Mak Mora	Husband's death; son's disappearance	Memory, adat prohibition	Emotional, cultural, ecological	Resilience with limited agency

Table 2. Pressures, resources, and forms of resilience of the female characters
(Source: Authors' analysis of the six short stories, 2026)

In *Amak* (Harianti, 2024), the protagonist loses her eldest daughter, Nora, after childbirth. At the grave she whispers, "Ngapo dek copek bonou kau pai, Nak" (Why did you leave so soon, my child?), yet when her granddaughter's umbilical cord falls off she declares, "Kita buat upacara turun mandi dan naik ayunan" (Let us hold the first-bathing and cradle ceremony). The shift from lament to ritual decision marks emotional and cultural resilience, but this resilience is systemic rather than individual (Ungar, 2018): ritual is the resource through which grief becomes responsibility. Because Amak initiates and directs the ceremony, her response also meets the criterion of agency as the capacity to define goals and act upon them (Kabeer, 1999). The closing line, "Nora telah memilih Nasywa sebagai pengganti" (Nora had chosen Nasywa as her replacement), reframes loss as the continuity of a female line.

In *Bertegah* (Al Ward, 2023), Bu Asih's resilience is likewise sustained from outside. While her husband is missing, "setiap malam warga berkumpul di rumah Bu Asih untuk berdoa, diawali membaca surat yasin" (every night the villagers gathered at Bu Asih's house to pray, beginning with Surah Yasin), and by the fourth day she is "Hanya pasrah kepada-Nya, diiringi doa yang dipanjatkan" (only surrendered to Him, accompanied by prayers). Within a Malay-Islamic framework, such surrender is *tawakal*, an active way of making sense of events beyond human control rather than acceptance of injustice inflicted by others. Her response is therefore coded as community-sustained resilience, not agency.

Ara in *Tepuk Tepung Tawar* (Tesniana, 2022) marks the limit of the concept. Her only refusal is silenced at once:

> "Ara pakai baju kurung biasa saja, Bu." Dia berusaha menolak. "Usah banyak cakap, Ra. Keluarga Abdul kejab lagi sampai." Ibu membuka ritsleting baju Ara, lalu memakaikan Kebaya Labuh itu dengan setengah memaksa. (Tesniana, 2022)
> ("I'll just wear an ordinary *baju kurung*, Mother." She tried to refuse. "Don't talk so much, Ra. Abdul's family will be here soon." Mother unzipped Ara's dress and, half by force, put the *Kebaya Labuh* on her.)

Any further resistance remains imagined, and on her wedding day "Ara melakukan semua seperti robot" (Ara did everything like a robot). Coding such endurance as resilience would normalize women's sacrifice as a virtue, so it is coded as compliance. The text, however, is not neutral: "Tampak indah di mata orang, tetapi pahit bagi Ara yang menjalaninya" (It looked beautiful to others but was bitter for Ara, who lived it). This agrees with Nurzaimah and Haryanti (2021) on adat norms shaping women's lives around marriage, but here the norm is marked evaluatively as a burden.

Sandra in *Pendar Zapin di Negeri Istana* (Rangkuti, 2020) moves through three categories. Heartbroken after her lover's arranged marriage and the loss of her mother, she arrives in Siak and must follow local dress codes: "Mau tidak mau, Sandra terpaksa harus manut" (Like it or not, Sandra was forced to obey). The double modality marks compliance. Worship, Kak Siti's companionship, and Zapin then support her recovery, and when her former lover returns, she decides for herself: "Di sini Aku berjuang membuka lembaran baru kehidupanku" (Here I am fighting to open a new page in my life). This is negotiation opening into agency in Mahmood's (2005) sense of inhabiting norms rather than only resisting them, since she gains room to decide by accepting the norms she first followed under compulsion and under the protection of a brother who defends her *maruah* (dignity). Read alongside Ara's story, arranged marriage harms women from both sides: as the one married off and as the one left behind.

Against studies that read female characters as either objectified or resisting (Dwitaningsih et al., 2024), the corpus thus shows a spectrum of responses shaped by access

to resources. Resilience is not an innate trait of Malay women but an outcome of what their surroundings provide or withhold.

Transmission, Reproduction, and Negotiation of Tradition

Table 3 classifies each character's cultural work and position. Among the six protagonists, only Amak is a full agent of transmission. The other agents are supporting characters (Kak Siti, the dance teacher, and Ara's mother), while the remaining protagonists are targets, recipients, limited agents, or subjects sustained by tradition. This qualifies the view that heritage survives through intergenerational transmission (UNESCO, 2003) by showing who, within the text, actually performs that transmission.

Story	Tradition	Cultural work	Position
Amak	*Turun mandi* and *naik ayunan*	Transmission, reproduction	Amak: agent and ritual authority
Pendar Zapin di Negeri Istana	Embroidered prayer garment, oral history of Siak, Zapin, dress rules	Transmission, negotiation	Kak Siti and dance teacher: agents; Sandra: recipient, prospective transmitter
Tepuk Tepung Tawar	*Kebaya Labuh*; *tepung tawar* by elders	Transmission of norms; reproduction under coercion	Mother: agent enforcing norms; Ara: target of the rite
Perempuan yang Terganggu Jiwanya oleh Sungai	Charm verses, betel leaf, river bathing	Reproduction without transmission	Roza: agent who does not pass on
Orang-Orang Bunian	Prohibition on entering the *imbo* forest	Transmission rejected	Mak Mora: agent with limited authority
Bertegah	Nightly prayers and Surah Yasin	Reproduction by the community	Bu Asih: subject sustained by tradition

Table 3. Cultural work and positions of the female characters
(Source: Authors' analysis of the six short stories, 2026)

Amak leads the ritual with an iron machete, "doa dan mantra" (prayers and incantations), and a greeting at the door, and directs her adult children: "Madan, ambil dupa dan kemenyan…" (Madan, fetch the censer and incense…) and "Warni, letakkan Nasywa ke buayan" (Warni, place Nasywa in the cradle). The blend of prayer and incantation embodies what *Pendar Zapin* calls "adat bersanding syariat" (custom alongside Islamic law) and confirms the family as the primary site of *tunjuk ajar*. Her authority, however, is conferred by adat on the basis of age and motherhood, and transmission is not exclusively female: her son, Ocu Madan, tells the Si Lancang legend to the children.

In *Pendar Zapin*, Kak Siti gives Sandra a "hasil sulam tangan" (hand-embroidered) prayer garment, recounts local history, and takes her to the Siak Palace, while the dance teacher draws her into Zapin; Sandra finally resolves to teach Zapin "kepada teman-teman dan junior-juniornya di kampus" (to her friends and juniors on campus). What is

transmitted, however, includes an ideal of femininity: through Sandra's eyes Kak Siti is the "cerminan wanita Melayu yang taat pada suami" (image of a Malay woman obedient to her husband). Women thus pass on norms that also constrain women, a pattern Kandiyoti (1988) calls bargaining with patriarchy.

The paradox is sharper in *Tepuk Tepung Tawar*. The *Kebaya Labuh* imposed on Ara is the garment her mother wore "dua puluh lima tahun lalu, saat sang suami melamarnya" (twenty-five years earlier, when her husband proposed), so the script of arranged marriage is inherited along with the object. *Tepung tawar*, "perlambang doa restu dari tetua kepada pengantin" (a symbol of the elders' blessing for the couple), is performed by elders upon Ara; ironically, Ridwan himself sprinkles rose water and "mengecup dahinya sambil membisikkan doa-doa baik" (kisses her forehead while whispering blessings). The story does not reject the rite. It separates the rite as meaningful heritage from the arbitrary authority attached to it. These findings run counter to Burhanuddin and Ahmadi (2024), who found women acting collectively to protect other women; here, relations between women become channels of norm enforcement.

The earlier classification of Bu Asih as an agent of preservation has been revised. The villagers recite Yasin, the hamlet head interprets Pak Jali's return as "petunjuk Allah" (God's guidance), and her own account is relayed by her husband ("Istri saya mengatakan…"; My wife says…). Whereas in *Amak* a woman keeps tradition alive, in *Bertegah* tradition keeps a woman going.

Women's cultural agency is therefore graded and divided by domain. Women are strong in life-cycle ritual and domestic socialization, whereas public, religious, and supernatural authority belongs to men: the hamlet head, the Bomo, and Sandra's brother, who threatens to bring her former lover before the Balai Kerapatan Tinggi Siak. This supports field studies of Malay women as keepers of practice (Azzahra & Rokis, 2025; Erni & Ulya, 2025) but also qualifies them, since women are not the sole foundation of continuity. Preservation is also selective, keeping rituals and knowledge while questioning the power that constrains women, in line with heritage as an active selection of what is carried forward (Harrison et al., 2020; Holtorf, 2018).

The Ecological Dimension of Tradition

Rivers and forests frame all six stories, and their condition determines whether practice can continue. In *Amak*, the river still sustains ritual: the feast includes river fish, and the *toman* served is "hasil tangkapan Ocu Madan di Sungai Kampar" (Ocu Madan's catch from

the Kampar River). In *Perempuan yang Terganggu Jiwanya oleh Sungai* (Hendri, 2022), the river has failed. Roza bathes while reciting her "pantun pemanis" (charm verses) with betel leaves, a practice of allure and hope of marriage that depends wholly on the river, yet "Ikan sudah banyak mati oleh racun limbah" (Many fish have died from the poison of waste). The fishermen she hopes to marry abandon their boats and lose land "dirampas pengusaha industri" (seized by industrialists). Pollution thus severs livelihoods, Roza's life prospects, and the material ground of a distinctly Malay practice (Erll, 2022). The narrator reads her monologues as "makiannya kepada pabrik-pabrik" (her curses against the factories), and the story ends with her cry:

> "Wahai sungai! Jika memang jodohmu adalah aku! Maka aku siap untuk memelukmu sampai mati! Tapi kalau jodoh aku manusia, berilah kembali nyawa ikan-ikan agar para pencari ikan kembali!" (Hendri, 2022)
> (O river! If I am indeed your destined match, I am ready to embrace you until death! But if my match is human, give the fish back their lives so the fishermen may return!)

This symbolic resistance is coded as agency. The text parallels Roza with the "pasrah" (resigned) river through shared fate rather than nature, extending readings of rivers as sites of women's resistance (Dewi, 2020) and of ecological values in short stories (Ali & Bahruddin, 2024). Her resilience is nonetheless fragile: when neighbors ask about her verses, "Roza selalu saja mendiamkan diri" (Roza always stays silent), so the knowledge lives only as long as she does.

In *Orang-Orang Bunian* (Al Husein, 2024), ecological knowledge takes the form of taboo. Mak Mora, a widow, forbids her son from entering the *imbo* forest, and he contests the taboo's history:

> "Tapi Mak, Atan raso itu bukan kesalahan, Bogel. Dio tak melanggar aturan apopun. Peraturan mengenai hutan imbo tu kan baru muncul saat Bogel menghilang." (Al Husein, 2024)
> (But Mother, I don't think it was Bogel's fault. He broke no rule. The rule about the *imbo* forest only appeared when Bogel disappeared.)

A flashback reveals that the forest was burned on the orders of a headman who "telah bersepakat dengan investor untuk membuka lahan perusahaan" (had made a deal with investors to clear land for a company), and that displaced tigers killed Mak Mora's husband before her eyes. The taboo can thus be read as collective memory of ecological violence encoded in supernatural terms, a form of traditional ecological knowledge comparable to the sacred forests that biocultural heritage studies treat as conservation knowledge (Berkes, 2018; Ekblom et al., 2019), which sustains community resilience only if it is transmitted (Berkes & Ross, 2013). Here transmission fails. Mak Mora cuts the conversation short ("Ehm… dah lah tu"; Hmm… enough of that), and Atan enters the forest. Although she searches desperately, "menggerayangi pematang, dusun, dan ladang" (groping through

dykes, hamlets, and fields), the villagers forbid her from entering the forest, and she has "tak ada pilihan lain" (no other choice) but to accept the Bomo.

Bertegah shows the same belief under different custodians. The villagers attribute Pak Jali's disappearance to the *bunian* because certain "waktu-waktu tertentu yang diyakini terlarang jika masih berada di sungai, seperti tengah hari dan saat magrib" (times believed forbidden on the river, such as midday and dusk), and the hamlet head steers the event toward religion. Across the stories, ecological damage originates in economic and elite power, while its costs fall on women who live alone. The corpus does not reserve ecological wisdom for women; in *Pendar Zapin*, a male farmer voices the adat principle "Berumah tidak merusak tanah, berkebun tidak merusak dusun" (Build without harming the land, garden without harming the village). What it genders is who bears the damage, who interprets taboo, and who is delegitimized for defending place.

Subject, Object, Narrator, and Reader Positions

Following Mills' discourse-level model (Mills, 1995, 1997), positions are read across the whole text: who acts and speaks, who is acted upon or labelled, and how narration aligns the reader. Stylistic features such as naming, transitivity, modality, evaluative lexis, and focalization serve as evidence for these positions rather than as the object of analysis. All six stories use a third-person narrator. Table 4 summarizes the positions and the form of negotiation with patriarchal structures in each story, from which three patterns emerge.

Story	Subject position	Object position	Narrator and reader cues	Negotiation with patriarchy
Amak	Amak: direct speech, imperatives	Nora's death	Retained dialect	Uses ritual authority granted by adat
Bertegah	Villagers and hamlet head	Bu Asih: narrated, quoted by her husband	Description of weeping	Depends on community and men's interpretation
Tepuk Tepung Tawar	Ara's inner life focalized	Ara: absent from the clause of decision	Evaluative lexeme *semena-mena*	Defended only at the level of narration
Pendar Zapin di Negeri Istana	Sandra focalized; speaks when rejecting Ardi	Sandra: target of rules; Kak Siti: object of admiration	Modality *terpaksa harus*; idealized *penurut*	Recovers under her brother's protection
Perempuan yang Terganggu Jiwanya oleh Sungai	Roza: monologues to the river	Roza: labelled *terganggu jiwanya*; youths' gaze	Narrator's comment on her *makian*	Faces patriarchal stigma and industry at once
Orang-Orang Bunian	Atan focalized	Mak Mora: warnings contested	Flashback to forest burning	Overruled by villagers and the Bomo

Table 4. Subject, object, narrator, and reader positions and negotiation with patriarchy (Source: Authors' analysis of the six short stories, 2026)

First, inner access does not equal power to act. Ara and Sandra are focalized, yet in "Tanpa Ara ketahui, Ayah dengan semena-mena, menerima lamaran Tengku Asnawi" (Without Ara knowing, Father arbitrarily accepted Tengku Asnawi's proposal), the father is the grammatical agent and Ara appears only in a phrase stressing her ignorance. Amak, barely focalized, holds the strongest subject position because her speech takes the form of commands. Narrative authority thus depends more on social role than on access to consciousness.

Second, descriptions of the female body, which Mills (1995) identifies as a key site of gendered representation, show where norms operate. Sandra's long skirt "seakan memaksa kaki jenjangnya untuk bertekuk mengikuti adat" (seemed to force her long legs to bend to adat); Ara's lips are painted redder than ever, and she belittles herself as "hitam legam" (pitch-dark); Roza's "lekuk pinggul" (curving hips) draw the youths' gaze; and the forest's menace is personified as "seorang wanita bertubuh jenjang, rambut memanjang, berkain putih berbau anyir" (a tall, long-haired woman in a rank-smelling white cloth). Unlike Aulia and Efendi (2025), who show a woman reclaiming her body, the body here is regulated, gazed at, or turned into a figure of threat.

Third, the reader position is not singular. The lexeme *semena-mena* invites readers to judge parental authority, and the narrator's reading of Roza's curses turns the label *terganggu jiwanya* (mentally disturbed), which elders attach to any woman who has grown old unmarried in a pattern of stigma that targets women outside marriage in Indonesia (Parker et al., 2016), into an ecological accusation. By contrast, Sandra's focalization invites admiration for Kak Siti's obedience, and the young men's teasing of Sandra is judged "masih dalam batas wajar" (still within reasonable bounds). The ideology is therefore ambivalent. Women are central to cultural continuity, but within structures that some texts critique and others naturalize. What emerges is neither passive guardians nor free agents but a representation of negotiation, which extends Sara Mills-based studies that treat subject and object as a binary (Fatihrahma et al., 2025).

Synthesis: Women's Resilience and Cultural Resilience

The findings can be synthesized in a three-layer model. Women's resilience draws on cultural resources; in using them, women reproduce and transmit those resources; and such reproduction is how cultural resilience works, maintaining identity while adapting (Berkes & Ross, 2013; Holtorf, 2018). The relation is reciprocal, since tradition cared for by women returns as a resource for them, as with Bu Asih. All three layers are mediated by patriarchal

structures, modernization, and the condition of ecological space. When this mediation is oppressive, the outcome is compliance (Ara) or broken transmission (Roza and Mak Mora).

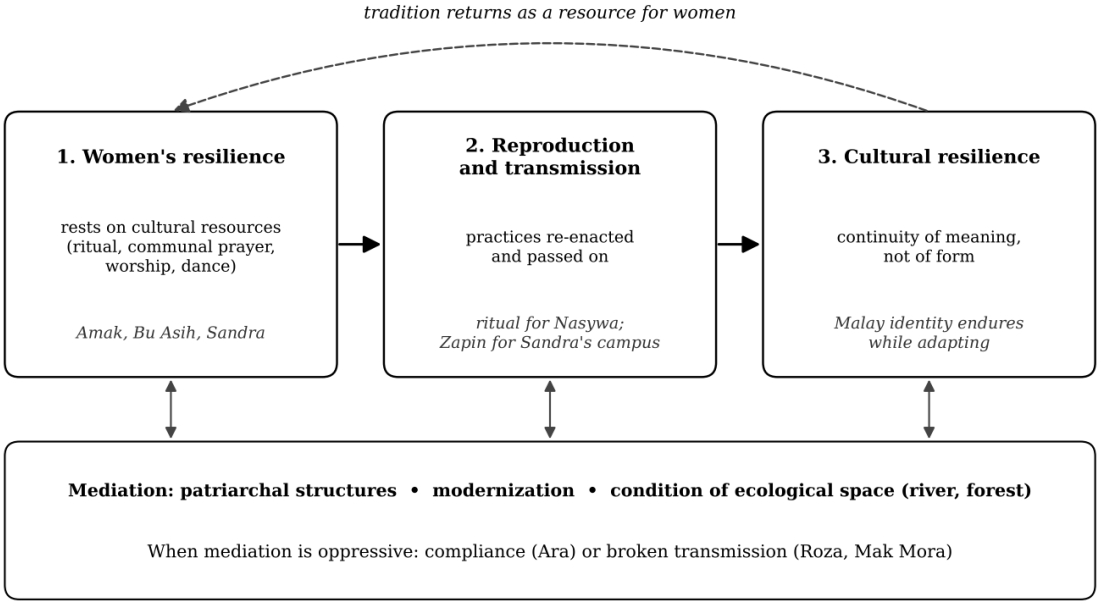


Figure 1. Three-layer model of women's resilience and cultural resilience in the six stories (Source: Authors' conceptual model, 2026)

Adaptation lies in how tradition is interpreted and enacted rather than in its form. The history of Zapin recounted in *Pendar Zapin* is emblematic:

> Menurut sejarah, tari Zapin dibawa oleh para pedagang Arab dari Yaman yang singgah ke Istana Siak. Tarian Zapin adalah gerakan kaki berulang-ulang. Pada mulanya, tarian ini diperankan oleh para penari laki-laki setelah menyelesaikan kegiatan mengaji di Istana Siak. Seiring bergulirnya waktu, tari Zapin dibawakan juga oleh wanita dan berpasang-pasangan. (Rangkuti, 2020)
> (According to history, Zapin was brought by Arab traders from Yemen who stopped at the Siak Palace. It is a dance of repeated footwork. At first it was performed by male dancers after Qur'an recitation at the palace. Over time, Zapin came to be performed by women as well, and in pairs.)

The tradition now passed on to Sandra is itself a product of cultural encounter and widening gender roles that has kept its meaning of *maruah*, much as other heritage practices have opened roles to women while leaving underlying hierarchies largely intact (Janse, 2019). The same holds for Amak's blend of prayer and incantation and for *Tepuk Tepung Tawar*'s separation of the rite from arbitrary authority. The continuity of Malay identity in these stories is thus a continuity of meaning, conditional on the rivers and forests in which meaning is handed down.

These findings concern representation in six stories and do not generalize about Malay society; studies of cultural disruption in Pekanbaru (Rahmah et al., 2025) and of modernization (Ramli et al., 2025) serve as the context to which the texts respond. Within these limits, the findings depart from earlier Mills-based studies by replacing the binary of

objectification and resistance with a spectrum of responses grounded in each character's relationship to tradition.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that, in six contemporary Riau Malay short stories, women are central to cultural continuity but occupy differentiated and ambivalent positions rather than a single role as guardians of tradition. Resilience appears where characters can draw on ritual, prayer, or community, as with Amak and Bu Asih, and narrows into coerced compliance where others decide for them, as with Ara. The claim that women act as agents of cultural transformation is therefore supported only where the texts show a woman's own action shaping a cultural outcome: Amak initiates and directs the *turun mandi* and *naik ayunan* ceremony for her granddaughter; Sandra rejects her former lover in her own voice and resolves to teach Zapin on her campus; and Roza sustains her riverside practice and openly condemns the factories that poisoned the river. The claim holds only partly for Mak Mora, whose prohibition is rejected and whose authority passes to the Bomo, and not at all for Ara, the target of a rite performed by elders, or for Bu Asih, whose resilience rests on prayers led by the villagers. Through subject, object, narrator, and reader positions, the narratives grant women centrality and moral legitimacy, yet some critique the authority that constrains them while others naturalize obedience, so what emerges is a representation of negotiation. These conclusions concern literary representation and are not generalizations about women's positions in Malay society.

The study makes three scholarly contributions. First, conceptually, it distinguishes resilience, negotiation, compliance, and agency, which prevents literary analysis from equating the ability to endure with acceptance of injustice, and it proposes a three-layer model in which women's resilience draws on cultural resources, reproduces them, and thereby sustains cultural resilience. Second, methodologically, it operationalizes Sara Mills' framework through explicit textual indicators for subject, object, narrator, and reader positions and combines them with codes for cultural work, so that representation and heritage practice can be analyzed together. Third, empirically, it reveals three patterns not reported in earlier studies: women's cultural authority is concentrated in life-cycle ritual and domestic socialization, while public, religious, and supernatural authority remains with men; relations among women can enforce constraining norms rather than resist them; and river and forest taboos encode memories of ecological damage whose transmission is fragile.

Practically, the framework can help teachers of Indonesian language and literature use local short stories to build students' cultural literacy and critical awareness of gender.

This study is limited to six short stories and to an analytical framework combining Sara Mills' feminist critical discourse analysis with the concepts of women's resilience and cultural resilience. Future research could expand the corpus to other genres and Malay cultural regions, compare representations in works by female and male authors, or examine how such stories can be used as learning materials to strengthen cultural literacy in Indonesian language and literature education.

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DECLARATIONS

Ethical considerations

Not applicable. This study analyzed published literary texts and did not involve human participants.

Use of artificial intelligence (AI)

The authors used AI-based tools (DeepL, Grammarly, and Claude) to a limited extent as technical support for language editing, translation, manuscript formatting, and reference searching. The research design, data collection and analysis, and conclusions were carried out entirely by the authors. All references were verified and all AI outputs were critically reviewed by the authors, who take full responsibility for the originality and accuracy of the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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