

## Women in La Galigo: A Feminist Literary Criticism of Bugis Female Representation

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### ABSTRACT

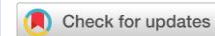
*This study explores the representation of women in the Bugis epic La Galigo, focusing on the characters Wé Datu Sengngeng and Wé Tenriabéng. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach and analyzed through the lens of feminist literary criticism, the research examines how women are depicted in relation to cultural values, gender roles, and the dynamics of patriarchy within Bugis society. The findings reveal that La Galigo constructs the image of Bugis women as ideal figures: loving mothers, faithful wives, guardians of domestic affairs, as well as intelligent, rational, and forward-looking individuals. However, these portrayals are shaped by cultural norms (pangngadereng) that both idealize and confine women, positioning them as treasures of the household—valuable yet restricted within the domestic sphere. The analysis further indicates that women in La Galigo are not naturally inferior but are made so through cultural and patriarchal structures. Despite these constraints, figures such as Wé Tenriabéng challenge stereotypes by embodying rationality, wisdom, and resistance, thereby highlighting the potential of women to transcend patriarchal boundaries. This study underscores how classical texts like La Galigo can be revisited through feminist perspectives to uncover both the constraints imposed on and the strengths embodied by women in traditional societies.*

**Keywords:** *La Galigo, Bugis Women, Feminist Literary Criticism, Gender Representation*

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## 1. Introduction

The issue of women to be discussed in this study concerns how they are represented in literary works, particularly in *La Galigo*. The main focus of this paper is the female characters and their characterization as portrayed by the narrator, both in concrete forms (observable through the senses) and in abstract dimensions (such as thoughts, ideas, attitudes, and personalities). This depiction of female figures, which the writer refers to as the “image of Bugis women,” encompasses all portrayals related to female characters through mental impressions, visual imagery, and expressions in words, phrases, and sentences within the text. As Nurgiyantoro (1998, p. 166) explains, characters in fiction are revealed not only through their identities but also through their traits, temperaments, and personalities, as well as the way they are represented by the narrator. In line with Ruthven (1984, p. 71), the problem addressed in this study is how women are represented in literary texts.

Specifically, this paper examines the female characters and characterization in *La Galigo*. The significance of understanding characters lies not only in identifying who they are or describing their physical attributes, but also in uncovering their personal qualities. These include (1) external features (appearance and form) and (2) internal traits such as temperament, personality, and values (Lubis, 1981, p. 47; Pattu et al., 2022; Muslimat et al., 2025).

Before moving on to the analysis of the “image of Bugis women in *La Galigo*, episode CTSWT,” it is important to first provide a brief overview of the narrative structure of *La Galigo*. As is widely known, *La Galigo* is an epic, multi-generational narrative that covers various aspects of its characters’ lives. Each episode focuses on a particular theme or figure, yet certain characters may reappear in different episodes. The narrative often begins with the birth of a central character, which then sets the stage for a chain of events that prepare for the development of the next episode. For example, the earliest episode, known as “Mula Tau” (The Beginning of Human Existence on Earth), introduces the first generation and continues through seven subsequent generations, with the main characters changing across time. Male protagonists range from To Palanroé, Batara Guru, Batara Lattuq, and Sawérigading, to his son I La Galigo, while female figures include Datu Palingéq, Wé Nyiliq Timoq, Wé Datu Sengngeng, Wé Panangangngareng, Wé Tenriabeng, and Wé Cudai.

In relation to the discussion of the “image of Bugis women,” this study focuses on two central female characters: Wé Datu Sengngeng (the mother of Sawérigading) and Wé Tenriabeng (Sawérigading’s twin sister). Both women embody the ideal image of femininity within the *La Galigo* narrative. Although their physical beauty is not described in detail, their image is constructed through their attitudes, personalities, and gentleness, either as a mother or as a royal consort. As mothers, they are portrayed as loving and nurturing figures; as wives, they are depicted as loyal companions; as household managers, they assume the role of treasurers; and as women, they are characterized as intelligent, rational, and forward-looking. Based on the background described above, the

central question of this study is: *How are Bugis women represented in the La Galigo epic, particularly in the episode “Cinta Terlarang Sawérigading kepada Wé Tenriabéng” (CTSWT)?*.

## 2. Literature Review

When discussing feminist theory, various forms of feminism have been introduced by scholars, including liberal feminism, Marxist feminism, radical feminism, theological feminism, and ecofeminism. Since the object of this study is a literary work, the perspective employed here is feminist literary criticism. Feminist literary criticism can be understood as a discipline that emphasizes the study of literature in order to trace how women are represented and how they ought to be represented (Ruthven, 1984:40–45; Aziz et al., 2022; Andini et al., 2022).

The application of a feminist literary perspective to this work is expected to provide new insights into the interpretation of past texts, particularly concerning how female characters are portrayed, how women are depicted, and how their potential is situated within patriarchal structures. One approach within feminist criticism that specifically addresses these issues is the concept of the image of women (Ruthven, 1990, p. 70–71; Nursaadah et al., 2025; Sosrohadi & Lutfhu, 2022). According to this concept, literary texts can be used as evidence to examine the types and forms of roles available to women (Adinda et al., 2023).

## 3. Method

This research applies a qualitative descriptive approach to analyze the representation of women in *La Galigo* through the perspective of feminist literary criticism. The focus is on two central female characters, Wé Datu Sengngeng and Wé Tenriabéng, to explore how Bugis women are portrayed in relation to cultural values, gender roles, and patriarchal norms. The primary data source is the classical Bugis epic *La Galigo*, particularly manuscripts and translated versions that narrate women’s roles and characteristics, while secondary data are drawn from academic works, journal articles, and books on Bugis culture, feminist literary criticism, and gender studies. Data were collected through close reading of selected parts of the text, note-taking of passages that highlight female representation, and documentary studies of relevant scholarly references. The analysis was carried out using the framework of feminist literary criticism (Ruthven, 1984; Culler, 1983), with emphasis on the concepts of *image of women*, gender construction, and stereotypes. The steps of analysis included identifying relevant textual passages, classifying findings into thematic categories such as motherly love, obedience, rationality, superiority, and stereotypes, and interpreting them in relation to Bugis cultural values and patriarchal systems. To ensure the credibility of the findings, triangulation was conducted by comparing interpretations with cultural studies on Bugis society and feminist theories, supported by peer discussions and expert consultations.

## 4. Results and Discussion

The use of a feminist literary perspective in this study is expected to open new insights in examining past manuscripts, particularly regarding how female characters are portrayed, how women are depicted, and how their potential is expressed within patriarchal structures. One approach within feminist criticism that specifically addresses these issues is the *image of women* perspective (Ruthven, 1990, p. 70–71). According to this concept, literary texts can serve as evidence for examining the kinds and forms of roles made available to women.

Feminist literary criticism may also be understood as an approach or perspective that consciously acknowledges the existence of two sexes in relation to culture, literature, and life. This distinction does not imply differences in the author, reader, or external factors influencing the writing situation. In broad terms, Culler (1983, p. 43–64) refers to this as *reading as a woman*. Reading as a woman signifies a conscious awareness that there are important gendered differences in the struggle for meaning in literary works. However, in the concretization of literature, Culler emphasizes not only gender in authorship and textual elements but also in readership. Iser (1987, p. 20) further states that the meaning of a text lies in the hands of its readers; it is the readers who construct meaning by filling in the gaps left open by the text. Therefore, interpretation always allows for the possibility that a single work may generate different meanings depending on the reader (Chamamah-Soeratno, 1994, p. 2). In this sense, readers play a central role.

### Data 1

*"Tania sia puang ponratu sangiang seri  
tennaponyameng ininnawakku.  
Iana Puang, tellu taunnaq marappo botoq,  
lao séwali warang-mparakku,  
mau kuritellaq La Banra Sugiq papputta manaq,  
tanginang to mala pattaro."*

"Your Majesty, Father, it is not the rice that displeases me.

But, Your Grace, for three years I have been gambling,  
my wealth has vanished.

That is why I have been given the name

La Barassugiq Papputa Manaq (the wealthy squanderer of inheritance),  
and still I have not been given a treasurer (a wife)."

### 4.1 Wé Datu Sengngeng

#### 4.1.1 A Forward-Looking Woman

In the narrative, Wé Tenriabéng is portrayed not only as a woman endowed with physical beauty but also with intelligence, both rational and emotional. Her rational, thoughtful, and wise way of making decisions demonstrates her intellectual capacity.

Physically, Wé Tenriabéng is described as a girl of extraordinary beauty, the daughter of Batara Lattuq and Wé Datu Sengngeng, and the golden twin (*dinru laweng*) of Sawérigading.

From birth to adolescence, the twins were placed in separate chambers: Wé Tenriabéng in the inner quarters of the palace, and Sawérigading in the outer section. The reason for this separation was the fear that, upon reaching maturity, they might fall in love with one another. Since Wé Tenriabéng's beauty was considered unmatched, it was believed that Sawérigading would inevitably fall for her. To prevent this, To Palanroé (The Creator) decreed that they should be raised apart.

Beyond her physical traits, Wé Tenriabéng is depicted through her personality—intelligent, rational, capable of problem-solving, and forward-looking. This rational quality of her character is highlighted in contrast to the emotional nature of Sawérigading. His reckless decision to defy customary law and ultimately kill Rajéng Maddopeq reflects male impulsiveness. In contrast, Wé Tenriabéng's efforts to counsel her brother to restrain his desires and acknowledge his wrongdoing demonstrate her rationality in problem-solving. She carefully considers the consequences of a forbidden (incestuous) marriage and, as a result, remains completely untempted by Sawérigading's advances.

Not only does Wé Tenriabéng warn her brother of the disastrous consequences of incest, but she also offers solutions to prevent the marriage. Her resolution involves two steps: first, she introduces Sawérigading to another prospective wife, Wé Cudai Daéng Risompa, the daughter of the Chinese king and her maternal cousin, who resided in Latanété. Second, she points to a large tree named Walenrengngé, which could be used to build the ship that would carry Sawérigading to China to meet his destined bride.

#### 4.1.2 A Superior Woman

The idea of female superiority in *La Galigo* is tied to the positioning of women in Bugis society. Fasih (2007:8–9) argues that men and women possess socially and culturally constructed traits: men are generally seen as strong, brave, and rational, while women are considered gentle, beautiful, motherly, and emotional. However, these characteristics can be exchanged depending on social and historical contexts; this is what is referred to as *gender*. Gender differs from *sex*, which is biologically determined and immutable (e.g., men produce sperm, while women possess wombs, breasts, and produce eggs).

Gender differences between men and women emerge through long processes of construction, socialization, and reinforcement by cultural, religious, and political institutions. Over time, these socially imposed differences are often perceived as divine decrees, making them appear unchangeable. This has resulted in inequalities in the roles and positions of men and women. For example, domestic responsibilities such as child-rearing and household management are often considered “women's duties,” even though such roles could also be fulfilled by men (Fasih, 2007:11).

In Bugis society, gender injustice existed even before the arrival of Islam. However, efforts to defend women and achieve gender equality also appeared, as reflected in *La Galigo*. Patriarchal culture attempted to assert itself by positioning some women as superior and others as inferior, reinforcing the idea that women existed for others. Simone de Beauvoir (2003) refers to this condition as women being the *second sex*. Yet, *La Galigo* does not reduce women to inferiority; instead, it presents them as possessing natural potential and strength comparable to men. The text even reverses stereotypes: women are depicted as rational, while men are often shown as emotional. This inversion elevates women to equal—if not superior—status. For instance, when Sawérigading tries to forcefully impose his will by marrying his twin sister, the outcome is the opposite: he ultimately yields to Wé Tenriabéng's reasoning and follows her counsel to seek a bride in China. In this way, Wé Tenriabéng exerts authority over him, reflecting the rational superiority of women.

Ruthven (1984:44–45) argues that female inferiority is not natural but socially constructed within male-dominated cultures, leaving women little choice but to live within such systems. This subordination inevitably fosters stereotypes. However, in Bugis society, as evidenced in history, women often held significant positions of power. For example, in the Kingdom of Wajo, four of the six major rulers were women. They exercised authority in public life just as men did, riding horses, governing, and enjoying freedom of movement. Women were consulted by men in governance, participated in state councils, and had equal rights in deliberations.

Historical records show that by the 17th century, Bugis women enjoyed equality with men, including rights to political decision-making and territorial inheritance. Even earlier, in *La Galigo* (NBG188, Vol. IX), the ruler Datunna Cina divided his realm equally among his fifteen children, granting sons and daughters the same rights.

#### 4.1.3 A Rational Woman

A persistent gender bias holds that women are irrational or overly emotional, and therefore unfit to participate in decision-making (Fakih, 2007:14). This perception has relegated women to secondary status in public policy and leadership. However, in Bugis society, women were not universally treated as subordinate. Evidence from the 17th century shows that several South Sulawesi kingdoms were ruled by women, and their authority was recognized as equal to that of male rulers. What mattered was their capacity and capability, not their sex (Pelras, 2006:187–190).

In *La Galigo*, women are shown to play crucial roles in decision-making. Batara Lattuq, or Oponna Luwuq (Sawérigading's father), consistently involved his wife and the community—both men and women—in discussions. All major decisions were made through consensus.

Even in times of crisis, Oponna Luwuq sought counsel not only from male leaders but also from women and elders, regardless of age or gender. Rajéng Maddopeq, an elderly woman who had lived for seven generations, was still consulted

because of her extensive knowledge and experience. This demonstrates the high value placed on women's rationality and wisdom in both governance and community life.

#### 4.1.4 Resistance to Stereotypes

Stereotypes are labels or markings attached to a particular group. One of their forms arises from gendered perspectives (Fakih, 2007:16). Stereotypes are a source of injustice experienced by women. Labels such as *mutia simpéng* (the jewel of the chamber), *ati gowari* (the essence of the chamber), *makkunrai teccékkaié alawa tengngang* (women who do not cross the central partition), and *ulu atuq* (the primary treasure) applied to women in *La Galigo* reveal how *pangngadereng* (customary law) restricted women, limiting their freedom of movement and confining their activities. Women's sphere of activity was constrained, extending only as far as the inner quarters.

The structure of Bugis houses or palaces, as described in the narrative, consisted of two main spaces: the inner room and the outer room or reception area. These two sections were separated by a central partition (*alawa tengngang*). The inner part of the house was designated as the women's domain, while the outer part belonged to men and also served as a reception area. Women only appeared in the reception area when bringing food during feasts or official state ceremonies, or when men were absent from the house. Women were confined to the inner quarters under the pretext of safeguarding their security, since they were regarded as the family's *ulu atuq* (primary treasure) whose honor and dignity had to be preserved. Thus, seclusion (*pingitan*) was imposed to protect women from the disturbance of foreign men.

The character Wé Tenriabéng experienced this seclusion for years, forced to relinquish her youth as her daily life was spent entirely within the chamber. In the story, it is mentioned that when a girl reached adolescence, a ceremonial rite would be held to mark her coming of age. Yet, for Wé Tenriabéng, this ceremony had to be postponed until Sawérigading departed from the Luwuq palace. This was done solely to avoid any encounter between them, as it was certain that Sawérigading would fall in love with his twin sister. Since sibling marriage was strictly prohibited by divine decree, violating it would bring destruction to the kingdom and dishonor to its rulers.

The restriction of women's mobility, as seen in Wé Tenriabéng's experience, illustrates that in Bugis society women were viewed as symbols of a family's honor and dignity. Based on these traditional values, women were considered more honorable if they remained at home, as this was thought to protect them from harassment that could diminish their honor. Stereotypes that labeled women who often went out as "immoral" and those who rarely left the house as "virtuous" or "noble" were inherited across generations and institutionalized in *pangngadereng*. Thus, negative labels such as "beautiful," "charming," or "talkative" became reflections of social reality and were regarded as inscribed in *La Galigo*. Consequently, judging women who "go out

frequently” or who “cannot keep secrets” as bad women was considered proper and justified by custom (tradition).

Even today, such views remain ingrained in the minds of many Bugis, especially men in search of a spouse. The ideal wife is still imagined as a noble woman of good character, known in Bugis as *malebbiq kédo* or *malebbiq ampé-ampé*. In *La Galigo*, women are often described as “beautiful,” “noble,” and “enchanted,” like pearls or the full moon. As a result, women were to be placed in safe spaces, far from male intrusion—the safest place being the chamber (the inner quarters).

Another persistent negative stereotype attached to women throughout history is that of being “talkative.” In the narrative, Wé Datu Sengngeng (the mother of Sawérigading) labeled Sawérigading’s wives as “talkative women” because they were unable to keep secrets. Wé Panangngareng (I Daruma) was accused of revealing to Sawérigading the existence of his twin sister Wé Tenriabéng, whose presence had been kept hidden. However, this accusation of being “talkative” was refuted when Wé Tenriabéng defended her cousins, saying: “Stop slandering my sister; your accusations are in vain, Mother, for it was not she who disclosed the secret, but my brother Pallawagauq, who told him during the three months they lived together in Tompoq Tikkaq.”

#### Data 2

*“Puang, masara bawekko ritu pétenai sapposisekku.*

*Taniya ritu lé paénréq kaq ri unga timu.*

*Kuwai si(y)a ri Tompoq Tikkaq*

*lé ri kakaku Pallawagauq lé rirampéang.*

*Tellumpulenna tessilésangeng tudang datué massapposiseng,*

*riéppengenna inanré sakkéq datu puakku Turuq Bélaé mallaibiné .”*

“My Lord, it is useless for you to slander my cousin.

It was not she who spoke about me,

but in Tompoq Tikkaq she was told.

It was my brother Pallawagauq who revealed it,

during the three months they spent together

at the funeral ceremony of His Majesty Turung Bélaé and his wife.”

The excerpt above illustrates that the trait of being “talkative” or unable to keep secrets is not exclusive to women but also applies to men. Wé Tenriabéng’s appeal to her parents not to continue slandering her female cousins serves as a defense of women, emphasizing that they should not always be the ones accused or blamed for dishonorable acts, since men, too, can be “talkative.”

*La Galigo*, in this study, reveals the connection between women’s (mothers’) fanaticism toward traditional values and the perpetuation of male patriarchal culture. Wé Datu Sengngeng and Wé Tenriabéng are two female characters from different

generations. Both are portrayed as figures who support and uphold the customary norms of their society. However, their ways of thinking differ. Wé Tenriabéng demonstrates a more progressive mindset compared to her mother, Wé Datu Sengngeng. While Wé Datu Sengngeng continues to follow the views of earlier generations, reinforcing men's stereotypical perceptions of women, Wé Tenriabéng challenges these inherited perspectives that corner and marginalize women.

The differing mindsets of these two female characters in *La Galigo* reflect the evolution of thought in Bugis society of the past. Wé Tenriabéng, depicted as a more capable character (intelligent, wise, and rational), becomes an icon of this transformation. Through her, it is revealed that women are not inferior beings to men but rather equals—and in some respects may even surpass men. Thus, the long-standing assumption that Sawérigading, as the legendary figure and cultural founder, symbolizes the advancement of civilization clearly contains a patriarchal bias. Literary evidence shows that the true reform of thought, which serves as a benchmark for civilizational progress, is embodied in *La Galigo* through the character of a woman, Wé Tenriabéng.

## 5. Conclusion

*La Galigo* presents women as the ideal Bugis women: loving mothers, faithful wives, keepers of domestic affairs, gentle, wise, intelligent, rational, and forward-looking. The figures of Wé Datu Sengngeng and Wé Tenriabéng serve as examples of women who were made inferior by culture (*pangngadereng*). To complete her perfection as a woman, she must remain at home (within the inner chamber). Therefore, in the story, Wé Tenriabéng is likened to a “chamber jewel,” a treasure of priceless value.

The characters Wé Datu Sengngeng and Wé Tenriabéng in the story are not naturally inferior but are rendered inferior by cultural construction. To be considered a “good” woman, she must play her role according to Bugis cultural values as dictated by *pangngadereng*. Wé Tenriabéng (female) and Sawérigading (male), born from the same womb on the same day (naturally equal), must ultimately be differentiated. According to prevailing customary norms, twins of different sexes (*dinru laweng*, the “golden twins”) are forbidden from living together in the same room. Thus, Wé Tenriabéng (female) was placed in the inner chamber of the palace, while Sawérigading (male) was placed in the outer chamber. In reality, Bugis women themselves were not treated as extremely as outsiders might assume. Within Bugis social life, society still recognized and acknowledged the potential that women possessed, just as men did.

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