

Beyond submission: *Sumarah*, female agency, and cultural resilience in Umar Kayam's *Sri Sumarah*

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Abstract - The Javanese concept of *sumarah* is frequently interpreted as passive surrender or resignation to fate. Such an interpretation, however, overlooks its ethical, cultural, and philosophical dimensions within Javanese society. This article re-examines *sumarah* through Umar Kayam's novella *Sri Sumarah*, arguing that the concept represents an indigenous ethics of cultural resilience rather than passive submission. Employing a qualitative interpretive design with a hermeneutic literary approach, the study analyses the narrative construction of Sri Sumarah's life in relation to Javanese ethical philosophy, cultural resilience, narrative ethics, and female agency. The analysis reveals that *sumarah* functions as an active ethical orientation through which the protagonist transforms personal loss, historical trauma, and social uncertainty into responsibility, perseverance, and meaningful action. Sri Sumarah's resilience is manifested not through resistance or confrontation but through her commitment to educating her daughter, sustaining her family through honest work, rebuilding her social identity as *Bu Guru Pijit*, and maintaining dignity amid adversity. Rather than depicting a submissive woman constrained by patriarchal traditions, Kayam presents Sri Sumarah as a morally autonomous subject whose agency is expressed through culturally embedded practices of patience, care, discipline, and responsibility. These findings challenge conventional readings of Javanese femininity by demonstrating that *sumarah* enables women to negotiate vulnerability while preserving ethical integrity and social continuity. The study contributes to contemporary humanities scholarship by positioning *sumarah* as a locally grounded philosophical framework that enriches global discussions of cultural resilience, indigenous knowledge, narrative ethics, and women's agency.

Keywords: *sumarah*; Javanese ethics; cultural resilience; female agency; Umar Kayam

1. Introduction

Contemporary humanities scholarship has increasingly examined how communities preserve cultural meanings while encountering rapid social, political, and technological transformations. Rather than understanding culture as a static inheritance from the past, recent cultural studies emphasize that traditions continuously undergo negotiation, adaptation, and reinterpretation. Within this perspective, cultural resilience refers not merely to the ability of individuals or communities to survive disruption but also to their capacity to maintain meaningful systems of



values, identities, and collective memories while responding creatively to change (Berkes & Ross, 2013; Cote & Nightingale, 2012).

The concept of resilience has developed beyond its initial association with ecological and psychological adaptation. In social and cultural studies, resilience is increasingly understood as a relational process shaped by historical experiences, social networks, cultural practices, and systems of meaning. Wilson (2020) argues that resilience must be examined through the cultural contexts in which communities interpret challenges and formulate responses. Consequently, resilience cannot be separated from local epistemologies because communities often rely on inherited knowledge systems to negotiate uncertainty and transformation.

Literature provides an important medium for examining such processes because narratives preserve collective experiences and represent the ethical negotiations through which individuals understand themselves and their communities. Ricoeur (1992) explains that narrative plays a central role in constructing human identity because individuals interpret their experiences through stories that connect past, present, and future. Similarly, Nussbaum (1990) highlights the significance of literature in developing moral imagination by enabling readers to encounter different forms of human vulnerability, responsibility, and ethical reasoning. Therefore, literary texts are not merely aesthetic objects but also cultural spaces where moral values and social identities are continuously negotiated.

Recent humanities scholarship has also challenged the dominance of universal theoretical frameworks by emphasizing the importance of indigenous and local knowledge systems. Indigenous knowledge is increasingly recognized not as a relic of traditional societies but as a dynamic epistemological framework that provides alternative ways of understanding human relationships, ethics, and community sustainability (Smith, 2021; Santos, 2018). Such perspectives are particularly relevant for postcolonial societies where local philosophies have often been marginalized by colonial knowledge structures. Recognizing indigenous concepts as theoretical resources allows humanities scholarship to move beyond the binary opposition between tradition and modernity.

Within the Javanese cultural context, ethical concepts such as *sumarah* represent significant forms of indigenous moral philosophy. These concepts have traditionally been associated with spiritual discipline, self-control, inner reflection, and harmonious relationships between individuals and their social environment. Geertz (1960) and Mulder (1978) demonstrate that Javanese ethical life is deeply connected with ideas of social harmony, emotional restraint, and the search for inner balance. However, these concepts should not be understood merely as religious practices or mystical traditions. They also represent ethical orientations through which individuals respond to difficulties, maintain social relationships, and negotiate changing circumstances.

Umar Kayam's fiction offers a significant literary space for examining these ethical dimensions. As one of Indonesia's prominent literary figures, Kayam frequently portrays Javanese communities experiencing tensions between traditional values and modern transformations. His works explore questions of identity, social change, family relationships, and cultural continuity. Previous studies have examined Kayam's representation of Javanese culture, social structures, and modernization (Hellwig, 1994; Faruk, 2007). Nevertheless, existing scholarship has rarely investigated how *sumarah* function as narrative representations of cultural resilience. This study proposes three research questions: How are *sumarah* represented in Kayam's fiction? How do these Javanese ethical concepts function as forms of cultural resilience? What contribution can Javanese philosophical perspectives make to contemporary humanities discussions on identity, ethics, and cultural continuity?

Berkes and Ross (2013) propose that resilience should be understood through the interaction between individuals, communities, and their cultural environments. Similarly, Cote and Nightingale (2012) argue that resilience is inseparable from social contexts because responses to change are shaped by historically developed knowledge systems and power relations. These perspectives challenge universal interpretations of resilience by emphasizing that every

community possesses distinctive ways of understanding vulnerability, adaptation, and continuity.

Within humanities scholarship, literature provides a significant space for exploring cultural resilience because narratives preserve collective memories and represent ethical responses to social transformation. Ricoeur (1992) explains that narrative contributes to human identity formation by connecting personal experiences with broader historical meanings. Through storytelling, communities negotiate questions of belonging, morality, and continuity. Likewise, Nussbaum (1990) emphasizes that literary works cultivate moral imagination by allowing readers to encounter diverse human experiences and ethical possibilities.

Recent discussions on indigenous and local knowledge have further expanded this perspective. Rather than viewing indigenous philosophies as static traditions, contemporary scholarship recognizes them as dynamic systems of knowledge that continue to shape human relationships, ethical choices, and cultural sustainability. Smith (2021) argues that indigenous knowledge must be understood within its own epistemological frameworks rather than merely evaluated through dominant academic traditions. Similarly, Santos (2018) highlights the importance of recognizing diverse knowledge systems beyond Western epistemological boundaries.

These perspectives are particularly relevant for understanding Javanese ethical philosophy. Javanese culture contains a complex moral system that emphasizes inner discipline, social harmony, and spiritual reflection. Concepts such as *sumarah* represent ethical orientations that guide individuals in managing personal struggles and maintaining relationships with others. Geertz (1960) and Mulder (1978) demonstrate that Javanese worldview is deeply connected with the pursuit of harmony (*rukun*), emotional restraint (*ngemong rasa*), and spiritual refinement.

Kayam occupies an important position in Indonesian literary history because his works consistently explore the relationship between tradition, modernity, and social transformation. His fiction often portrays Javanese communities experiencing cultural negotiation in the context of modernization, political change, and shifting social structures. Previous studies have examined Kayam's works from various perspectives, including cultural identity, social change, Javanese values, and representations of traditional society. Hellwig (1994), for example, discusses Indonesian literary representations of gender and social structures, while Faruk (2007) examines Indonesian literature within broader cultural and ideological contexts. These studies demonstrate that Kayam's fiction provides important insights into Indonesian cultural experiences.

The concept of resilience has undergone significant conceptual development across disciplines. Initially associated with ecological systems and psychological adaptation, resilience has gradually expanded into social and cultural domains. In contemporary humanities, resilience is increasingly understood not simply as the capacity to recover from disruption but as the ability of individuals and communities to preserve, reinterpret, and transmit meaningful values under conditions of change.

Berkes and Ross (2013) argue that resilience involves the interaction between individual capacities, community relationships, and cultural resources. From this perspective, resilience is embedded within social practices and collective knowledge rather than existing solely as an individual psychological capacity. Communities maintain resilience through narratives, traditions, rituals, and ethical frameworks that provide meaning during periods of uncertainty.

Similarly, Cote and Nightingale (2012) emphasize that resilience cannot be separated from cultural and political contexts. They criticize universal approaches that treat resilience as a neutral process because responses to disruption are always shaped by particular histories, identities, and power relations. Thus, cultural resilience requires attention to how communities define what should be preserved, transformed, or abandoned.

The relationship between literature and ethics has been widely discussed in contemporary literary theory. Rather than viewing literary works merely as aesthetic constructions, narrative ethics considers literature as a space where human values, moral conflicts, and ethical possibilities are explored.



Ricoeur (1992) argues that narrative is central to human identity because individuals understand themselves through stories that connect personal experiences with collective histories. Identity is therefore not fixed but continuously constructed through interpretation and remembrance. This perspective is important for examining literary characters who negotiate between inherited traditions and changing social realities.

Nussbaum (1990) similarly emphasizes that literature develops moral imagination by allowing readers to encounter complex human situations that cannot always be reduced to abstract ethical principles. Through literary narratives, readers engage with questions of responsibility, vulnerability, suffering, and human dignity.

Refugee and migrant women's agency is widely understood as a dynamic process through which women negotiate structural constraints, cultural expectations, and everyday challenges. Rather than viewing agency simply as individual independence or resistance, recent studies emphasize women's capacity to make choices, adapt, negotiate, and exercise influence within restrictive social contexts. Refugee women, for example, demonstrate agency through stories of resistance, resilience, and forward-looking strategies despite displacement and marginalization (Borges, 2025). Similarly, everyday agency among refugee women is shaped by specific cultural contexts, suggesting that agency may appear through subtle and routine practices rather than overt forms of resistance (Kanal & Rottmann, 2021). Migrant women workers likewise exercise agency through resilience, reworking existing circumstances, and resistance to structural inequalities in workplaces and migration contexts (Rydzik & Anitha, 2020). These perspectives indicate that women's agency should be understood as situated, relational, and continuously negotiated rather than as an entirely autonomous individual capacity.

The intersection between agency, marginality, and empowerment is particularly evident among migrant and culturally marginalized women. Ageing non-European migrant women demonstrate resilience, reworking, and resistance while negotiating social and structural disadvantages associated with migration, gender, and ageing (KC, 2025). Women experiencing marginality can also develop agency through strategies of negotiation and empowerment, particularly when navigating cultural and social boundaries (Suleymani, 2025). In urban India, women's sense of agency is similarly connected to their ability to bargain for freedoms and negotiate everyday social expectations (D'souza & Kapoor, 2024). Feminist relational agency among Indian American women further demonstrates how women negotiate and contest heteronormative gender norms while maintaining relationships and cultural identities (Mudambi & Harris, 2024). These studies collectively show that agency can involve negotiation and accommodation as much as direct opposition to dominant structures.

Resilience is another major dimension of women's agency, particularly in contexts of violence, conflict, displacement, and social adversity. Agency among survivors of intimate partner violence can emerge through the reconstruction of voice, identity, and resilience within particular social and geographical contexts (Mackey, 2026). Women affected by armed conflict similarly employ agency through coping strategies and participation in resilience-oriented programs, demonstrating that coping itself can constitute an active form of agency (Motahar, 2026). A feminist understanding of resilience also challenges interpretations that portray women merely as passive victims, emphasizing instead the political and relational dimensions of survival, adaptation, and collective action (De Almagro & Bargués, 2022). Women social workers in Aceh's disaster recovery further illustrate how women contribute actively to recovery processes through forms of often-unrecognized social and community labor (Saleh et al., 2025).

Women's agency is also closely connected to climate change, disaster risk reduction, and community resilience. Women in climate-vulnerable regions exercise agency by responding to environmental pressures, negotiating gender norms, and developing strategies that strengthen household and community resilience (Hossain et al., 2025). Gender norms, however, can both constrain women's opportunities and shape the forms of resilience available to them in low- and middle-income communities (Farnworth et al., 2026). In Indonesia, women's participation in

disaster risk reduction demonstrates how cultural knowledge and community involvement can become important sources of agency and resilience (Nurhayati et al., 2026). Similarly, women in climate-affected farming villages use personal narratives to demonstrate resilience and adaptive responses to changing environmental and socioeconomic conditions (Nguyen, 2026). Women's leadership in challenging environments also involves adaptive mechanisms that allow them to confront gender-related barriers while continuing to exercise leadership (Obasohan, 2026). These findings suggest that women's agency can contribute not only to individual survival but also to collective adaptation and community resilience.

Cultural knowledge, memory, and everyday practices provide another important avenue through which women exercise agency. Elderly Bedouin women, for instance, maintain and transmit Indigenous knowledge through memory, cultural practices, and intergenerational communication, positioning them as active contributors to cultural continuity rather than passive recipients of tradition (Alhuzail et al., 2026). Similarly, women's decisions concerning menstrual practices among Nepali migrant communities demonstrate that agency can involve both retaining and relinquishing cultural practices depending on social circumstances, identity, and personal priorities (Baumann et al., 2025). Agency among communal women in Peru is likewise relational and situated, indicating that women's actions are embedded within community relationships and specific sociocultural environments (Velázquez & Ruiz Bravo, 2025).

Women's leadership and institutional agency further demonstrate how individual and collective action can influence broader social structures. Women leaders facing gender-related challenges employ adaptive strategies to negotiate institutional and social barriers, showing that leadership can function as a form of agency in unequal environments (Obasohan, 2026). In educational and religious institutions, women's leadership can contribute to organizational resilience by responding to changing social conditions and maintaining institutional continuity (Adzhar et al., 2026). Across these studies, agency is therefore presented not merely as resistance to oppression but as women's capacity to negotiate, adapt, lead, preserve cultural knowledge, and transform difficult circumstances.

The literature demonstrates that women's agency is multidimensional and strongly influenced by cultural, relational, institutional, and structural contexts. Across migration, conflict, disaster, climate change, cultural preservation, and leadership, women exercise agency through resistance, negotiation, adaptation, resilience, and collective participation. The reviewed studies also challenge binary understandings of agency as either resistance or submission, showing instead that apparently accommodating practices may represent meaningful strategic choices within constrained circumstances (Kanal & Rottmann, 2021; Rydzik & Anitha, 2020). Thus, women's agency is best conceptualized as a situated and relational process through which women negotiate constraints while creating possibilities for resilience, empowerment, cultural continuity, and social transformation.

Previous studies on Indonesian literature have examined Javanese identity, women's representation, cultural values, discrimination, and spiritual traditions from various theoretical and methodological perspectives. Indonesian nationalism has been explored through the representation of national identity and the position of subaltern women in three significant Indonesian novels, demonstrating how gender and national identity are interconnected in literary narratives (Wulandari, 2023). The representation of Javanese women has also been examined from a feminist perspective, revealing the ways female characters negotiate social expectations, gender roles, and cultural norms within Javanese society (Rosita & Sulanjari, 2023). Similarly, studies of Umar Kayam's fiction indicate that Javanese cultural values and patterns of behaviour are closely connected with multiculturalism and the representation of social relationships (Suroso, 2017). The images of Javanese women in *Sri Sumarah* and *Bawuk* further demonstrate the complex relationship between women's identities, family responsibilities, and traditional Javanese values (Jang-Gyem, 2018).

The selected studies demonstrate a consistent scholarly interest in literary analysis, particularly in examining psychological, social, cultural, and interpersonal dimensions



represented in literary and cinematic works. The analysis of *The Old Man and the Sea* highlights self-confidence as a significant characteristic of the protagonist, showing how literary characters can reflect psychological strength and resilience in confronting challenges (Wajdi et al., 2024a). Similarly, the analysis of *Laskar Pelangi* focuses on social class dynamics and illustrates how socioeconomic differences shape relationships, opportunities, and experiences among characters (Wajdi et al., 2024b). These studies indicate that literary works can serve as meaningful sources for understanding individual identity as well as broader social realities.

Other studies emphasize interpersonal relationships, memory, emotional experiences, and cultural values. The review of *Sebuah Usaha Melupakan* examines memory and healing, demonstrating how literary narratives can portray emotional struggles and processes of coping with personal experiences (Wajdi et al., 2023a). Meanwhile, the analysis of *Reply 1988* identifies friendship, family, love, and nostalgia as interconnected themes, emphasizing the importance of interpersonal bonds and shared memories in shaping individual and collective experiences (Wajdi et al., 2025). Film and book reviews also contribute to the understanding of contemporary popular culture by examining narrative content and the values conveyed through cinematic and literary representations (Wajdi et al., 2023b; Wajdi et al., 2023c). Overall, these studies suggest that literary and audiovisual texts provide rich contexts for investigating psychological characteristics, social structures, emotional experiences, interpersonal relationships, and cultural meanings through qualitative interpretive approaches.

Other studies have focused on gender discrimination and stereotypes in Indonesian literary works. The novels *Entrok*, *Maryam*, and *Pasung Jiwa* have been analysed to reveal various forms of discrimination against women and the social structures that contribute to their marginalization (Suryaningrum et al., 2019). Related research on *Entrok* shows that female characters challenge stereotypes associated with women in Javanese society, suggesting that literature can become a space for questioning established gender expectations (Suryaningrum et al., 2019). The issue of discrimination is also evident in the monologue *Balada Sumarah*, where women's experiences illustrate unequal treatment and gender-based social constraints (Irsyad & Zulfadhli, 2023). These studies collectively demonstrate that Indonesian literary works provide important representations of women's struggles, social identities, and negotiations with patriarchal and cultural structures.

Javanese cultural identity and social categorization have also received attention in studies of Umar Kayam's works. Research on Kayam's fiction demonstrates that categories such as communist, Chinese, and Jewish are not always fixed but can be represented as fluid social identities shaped by historical and cultural contexts (Sarwoto, 2020). More specifically, the cultural dimensions of *Sri Sumarah* have been investigated through a socio-cultural perspective, highlighting the relationship between literary narratives and Javanese social practices (Lia, 2018). Ethnographic research further identifies *sumarah* and *tirakat* as significant Javanese cultural and spiritual concepts reflected in Indonesian literature, emphasizing surrender, inner discipline, contemplation, and traditional approaches to life (Ismawati, 2020).

The concept of *Sumarah* has also been investigated beyond literary studies, particularly in relation to religious tolerance and interreligious practices. Research on the Sumarah community in Tulungagung demonstrates the development of religious tolerance through interactions and shared spiritual values among community members (Qalby, 2024). Similarly, the practice of *sujud Sumarah* illustrates forms of interreligious participation in which spiritual practices can create spaces for interaction across religious boundaries (Maulana et al., 2021). These findings suggest that *Sumarah* is not only a literary or cultural concept but also represents a broader spiritual and social practice within Indonesian society.

The reviewed studies establish that Javanese literature is an important medium for representing cultural identity, spirituality, gender relations, social discrimination, and changing patterns of social behaviour. However, existing research tends to examine these dimensions separately, with some studies emphasizing women and feminism, others focusing on Javanese cultural values, and others examining Sumarah as a spiritual or religious practice. This indicates

a research gap for studies that integrate literary analysis with an ethnographic understanding of *sumarah* and *tirakat*, particularly in examining how these cultural practices are represented, negotiated, and given meaning within Indonesian literature. Such an approach can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between literary representation, Javanese cultural identity, and lived cultural practices.

Recent humanities scholarship has increasingly emphasized the importance of indigenous and local knowledge systems in challenging dominant epistemological frameworks. Indigenous knowledge is no longer viewed merely as traditional information inherited from the past but as a living intellectual resource that offers alternative understandings of human relationships, morality, and sustainability. Smith (2021) argues that indigenous methodologies require recognition of knowledge systems developed within specific cultural histories and communities. Such recognition is particularly significant in postcolonial contexts where local epistemologies have often been marginalized by colonial forms of knowledge production.

Santos (2018) similarly proposes the idea of “epistemologies of the South” to highlight diverse forms of knowledge that have been excluded from dominant academic traditions. This perspective encourages scholars to engage seriously with local philosophies as theoretical resources rather than treating them only as cultural objects of study.

The concept of *sumarah* is commonly associated with surrender, acceptance, and trust in a higher order of existence. However, within Javanese ethical thought, *sumarah* should not be interpreted as passive resignation. Rather, it represents an active spiritual and ethical attitude in which individuals accept circumstances while continuing to act responsibly.

Mulder (1978) explains that Javanese spirituality emphasizes the cultivation of inner harmony (*batin*) and the management of human desires. This orientation reflects an ethical understanding that external harmony begins with internal discipline.

2. Method

This study employs a qualitative interpretive design using a hermeneutic literary approach. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the research focuses on interpreting meanings, ethical values, and cultural representations embedded within literary narratives. Rather than measuring cultural phenomena statistically, this study seeks to understand how literary texts construct and negotiate ideas of cultural resilience through narrative structures, characters, and symbolic expressions. The hermeneutic approach is employed because literary interpretation involves a process of understanding meanings within particular historical, cultural, and philosophical contexts. Following Gadamer’s (2004) hermeneutic perspective, interpretation is not a mechanical process of extracting fixed meanings from texts but a dialogical encounter between the interpreter, the text, and the cultural horizons that shape understanding. Therefore, the analysis considers both the internal elements of the narratives and the broader Javanese philosophical contexts that inform their meanings. The primary data of this study consist of selected fictional works by Kayam that represent Javanese cultural values, social transformation, and ethical reflection, Sri Sumarah novella.

The analysis follows a hermeneutic interpretive (Recoeur, 1976; 1981) process consisting of four analytical stages. First, textual identification. The study identifies narrative elements that represent Javanese ethical values, including characters’ attitudes, dialogues, conflicts, and symbolic expressions. Second, contextual interpretation. The identified textual elements are interpreted within the cultural context of Javanese philosophy. Concepts such as *sumarah* is examined not as isolated cultural terms but as ethical frameworks that influence human behaviour and social relationships. Third, theoretical dialogue. The interpretations are connected with cultural resilience and narrative ethics theories to demonstrate how local philosophical concepts contribute to broader humanities discussions. Fourth, synthesis. The final stage develops an integrated interpretation of how Umar Kayam’s fiction represents cultural resilience through Javanese ethical imagination.



3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Results

3.1.1 The Construction of Javanese Femininity: Between Cultural Expectation and Ethical Formation

One of the earliest representations of Sri Sumarah's identity in Umar Kayam's novella emerges through the teachings transmitted by her grandmother. Sri does not regret following her grandmother's guidance because those teachings have shaped her into a woman capable of maintaining harmony within marriage. Kayam writes:

"Sri sungguh merasa tidak menyesal mengikuti petunjuk neneknya tempo hari. Meskipun tidak mungkin berlaku sebagai seorang Sembadra tulen, tetapi ngelmu yang diwejangkan embahnya telah cukup membentuknya sebagai seorang wanita yang bisa mengikat suami. Badannya tetap segar, sintal, langsing karena Sri tidak pernah alpa meminum jamu-jamunya."
(Sri Sumarah, p. 16)

This passage illustrates how Javanese femininity is constructed through cultural teachings, bodily discipline, and marital responsibility. The reference to Sembadra, a female figure in Javanese *wayang* tradition known for loyalty and devotion, positions Sri within an idealized model of womanhood. Her grandmother's teachings (*ngelmu*) do not merely concern domestic skills but represent a broader cultural education about how a woman should cultivate herself physically, emotionally, and socially.

However, this representation requires a critical reading. At the surface level, Sri's body is described through conventional ideals of feminine beauty: freshness, proportionality, and attractiveness. Such representation reflects a patriarchal expectation that a woman's value within marriage is partly connected to her ability to maintain her husband's affection. Nevertheless, Kayam's narrative does not stop at reproducing this gender expectation. The knowledge inherited by Sri later becomes an important resource that enables her to survive when the security of marriage disappears.

In other words, the same cultural system that initially defines Sri through her role as a wife eventually provides her with ethical and practical resources to face hardship independently. The teachings of her grandmother become a form of cultural capital that shapes her discipline, patience, and self-management. Thus, Sri's femininity is not merely a passive acceptance of patriarchal norms; it becomes part of the foundation through which she develops resilience.

This complexity reflects Mahmood's (2005) argument that agency should not always be understood as resistance against existing cultural structures. Agency may also operate through embodied practices, ethical self-formation, and meaningful participation within particular traditions. Sri's acceptance of Javanese feminine ideals does not eliminate her agency; instead, these values become resources through which she negotiates suffering and reconstructs her life.

Therefore, the representation of Sri Sumarah's body and femininity in the opening part of the novella should be understood as more than a description of an ideal wife. It establishes the cultural foundation from which Sri develops the ethical strength associated with *sumarah*: patience, self-control, responsibility, and the ability to endure uncertainty.

3.1.2 Sumarah as Active Acceptance and Ethical Responsibility

The meaning of *sumarah* in Umar Kayam's novella becomes explicit through the narrator's description of Sri Sumarah's response to suffering. After losing her husband, Sri does not allow herself to remain trapped in grief. The narrator states:

"Sri Sumarah bukan Sri Sumarah bila dia tidak 'sumarah' terhadap nasibnya. Dengan sikap 'sumarah' itu dia tidak membiarkan dirinya berkabung lama-lama. Pusat perhatiannya adalah Tun. Kata-kata terakhir suaminya dianggapnya sebagai amanat keramat yang mesti dilaksanakan lewat jalan apa pun." (Sri Sumarah, p. 17)

This passage provides a crucial insight into Kayam's understanding of *sumarah*. The repetition of the phrase "Sri Sumarah bukan Sri Sumarah bila dia tidak *sumarah*" creates a symbolic connection between the protagonist's name and her ethical identity. *Sumarah* is not merely a personal characteristic; it becomes the fundamental principle through which Sri understands herself and responds to life circumstances.

Importantly, the passage challenges the interpretation of *sumarah* as passive surrender. Although Sri accepts her fate, she does not withdraw from life. Instead, her acceptance produces action. She refuses prolonged mourning because she has a responsibility toward Tun, her daughter. Her attention shifts from personal loss to ethical obligation. Thus, *sumarah* functions as an active form of acceptance in which suffering is transformed into commitment and responsibility.

This dimension distinguishes Javanese *sumarah* from simple resignation. Sri does not deny her pain, nor does she possess the ability to change the circumstances surrounding her husband's death. However, she exercises agency through the decision to continue fulfilling her responsibilities. Her husband's final words become an "amanat keramat" (sacred mandate), transforming memory into an ethical source of motivation.

From the perspective of cultural resilience, Sri's response demonstrates that resilience is produced through systems of meaning. Berkes and Ross (2013) argue that individuals and communities develop resilience through cultural resources that provide interpretation and direction during periods of crisis. For Sri Sumarah, the teachings inherited from her husband and grandmother become the cultural foundation that enables her to endure loss.

The passage also reflects Ricoeur's (1992) concept of narrative identity, in which individuals construct the meaning of their lives through the interpretation of significant experiences. Sri's identity as a resilient woman emerges not because she avoids suffering, but because she transforms suffering into a moral commitment. Her husband's death becomes not merely a personal tragedy but a moment that redefines her role as a mother and caretaker.

Furthermore, the phrase "melaksanakan lewat jalan apa pun" reveals the active dimension of Sri's *sumarah*. Acceptance does not eliminate effort; rather, it directs effort toward meaningful purposes. Sri's endurance, therefore, represents an ethical practice combining acceptance, responsibility, and perseverance.

3.1.3 Sumarah, Female Agency, and the Ethics of Everyday Resilience

While *sumarah* is often translated as surrender or acceptance, Umar Kayam demonstrates that the concept also generates ethical action in everyday life. Sri Sumarah does not merely endure suffering; she transforms acceptance into responsibility, productivity, and hope for the next generation. Her resilience is expressed through ordinary practices rather than extraordinary acts of heroism.

Following the death of her husband, Sri redirects her attention toward her daughter's future. Unlike her own educational experience, she hopes that Tun will receive a broader education in a public school and continue to senior high school:

"Sri ingin agar anaknya tidak sekolah SKP seperti dia dulu, tetapi ingin anaknya masuk sekolah umum. Dan insyaallah, bila si Tun terus cerdas sekolahnya, Sri ingin juga agar anaknya bisa meneruskan ke SMA ... agar luas pandangannya dan, yah, agar senang juga" (Kayam, 2005, p. 193).

This passage reveals that *sumarah* does not discourage aspiration. On the contrary, Sri's acceptance of her own circumstances encourages her to create better opportunities for her daughter. Education becomes an ethical investment in the future, reflecting a forward-looking orientation rather than passive resignation. Her resilience therefore extends beyond personal survival toward intergenerational responsibility.

Sri's ethical agency is further illustrated through her attitude toward work. Kayam describes how she accepts every sewing job offered by her neighbours:



"Pekerjaan jahitan besar-kecil ... diterimanya dengan tanpa keluhan dan pilih kasih. Semua dikerjakannya dengan cermat dan rapinya, serta upah berapa saja ... diterima dengan ikhlas tanpa tawar-menawar" (Kayam, 2005, p. 197).

Rather than emphasizing economic hardship alone, this passage highlights values of diligence, sincerity, and professional integrity. Sri performs her work carefully regardless of the size of the payment, suggesting that labour is understood not merely as a means of earning income but also as an ethical practice. Her willingness to work conscientiously reflects the Javanese ideal of fulfilling one's responsibilities with patience and honesty.

Kayam reinforces this ethical orientation by portraying Sri's willingness to undertake additional work despite difficult circumstances:

"Dihemat-hematnya hidupnya ... menerima pesanan pisang goreng ... demi untuk mendapat tambahan modal" (Kayam, 2005, p. 207).

The passage demonstrates that *sumarah* is inseparable from perseverance. Acceptance does not eliminate effort; instead, it motivates disciplined action. Sri carefully manages her limited resources while continuously seeking lawful opportunities to support her family. Her resilience is therefore grounded in everyday practices of frugality, hard work, and responsibility. The culmination of Sri's transformation appears when massage becomes her primary occupation:

"Begitulah memijit menjadi mata pencaharian pokok bagi Sri. Sri sama sekali tidak merasa kecil, rendah ataupun malu dengan pekerjaannya itu. Pertama, itu halal, dan kedua, yang penting pekerjaan itu mendatangkan pendapatan yang teratur dan cukup bisa menyangga rumah tangganya" (Kayam, 2005, p. 229).

This passage marks a significant shift in Sri's identity. She no longer defines herself through widowhood or personal loss but through meaningful work and ethical self-respect. Kayam deliberately emphasizes that Sri feels neither inferior nor ashamed because her work is *halal* and enables her to support her household. Economic independence thus becomes inseparable from moral dignity.

Taken together, these episodes demonstrate that *sumarah* should not be interpreted as passive submission. Instead, it constitutes an ethical framework that enables individuals to transform suffering into constructive action. Sri's resilience is expressed through educating her daughter, embracing honest labour, managing scarcity, and rebuilding her livelihood. Her agency operates not through confrontation or rebellion but through sustained responsibility and ethical commitment in everyday life.

From the perspective of cultural resilience, these practices illustrate how indigenous ethical values become practical resources for navigating adversity. Sri's strength lies not in overcoming hardship through domination but in sustaining hope, preserving dignity, and ensuring continuity for the next generation. In this sense, *sumarah* functions as an ethics of everyday resilience, where acceptance and action are mutually reinforcing rather than contradictory.

3.i.4 Dignity through Work: Reconstructing Social Identity

Kayam further develops Sri Sumarah's resilience through the reconstruction of her social identity after widowhood. When massage becomes part of her livelihood, the narrator carefully distinguishes Sri from the common stereotype associated with traditional masseuses:

"Di kampungnya dia dipanggil Bu Guru Pijit. Sesungguhnya dia bukan guru pijit. Dia tukang pijit. Ah tidak juga sesungguhnya.... Dia memijit hanya menurut panggilan saja." (Kayam, 2005, p. 182).



This narrative description is more than a clarification of occupation. It reveals how Kayam negotiates the social meaning of women's work. The narrator deliberately rejects conventional images of itinerant masseuses who publicly seek customers. Instead, Sri is portrayed as someone whose service is requested because of trust, reputation, and personal relationships within the community.

The title "*Bu Guru Pijit*" is particularly significant. Although she is no longer a teacher's wife, the honorific *Bu Guru* preserves the moral respect historically attached to her social identity. Her work as a masseuse therefore does not diminish her dignity; rather, it reconstructs her place within the community through honest labour and public trust. The community recognizes not merely her occupation but also her integrity.

This representation demonstrates that resilience involves the reconstruction of social identity after disruption. Following the death of her husband and the political tragedy affecting her family, Sri does not become socially invisible. Instead, she acquires a new identity grounded in competence, service, and ethical commitment. Her work allows her to remain socially connected while sustaining her household.

Kayam subsequently reinforces this idea by emphasizing Sri's own perception of her profession:

"*Begitulah memijit menjadi mata pencaharian pokok bagi Sri. Sri sama sekali tidak merasa kecil, rendah ataupun malu dengan pekerjaannya itu. Pertama, itu halal, dan kedua, yang penting pekerjaan itu mendatangkan pendapatan yang teratur dan cukup bisa menyangga rumah tangganya.*" (Kayam, 2005, p. 229).

The emphasis on *halal* and the absence of shame reveals that work possesses an ethical as well as an economic meaning. Sri evaluates her occupation according to moral legitimacy rather than social prestige. Honest labour becomes a source of dignity because it enables her to fulfil her responsibilities without compromising her values.

From the perspective of cultural resilience, this transformation is particularly significant. Resilience is not limited to emotional endurance but also involves rebuilding meaningful social roles after loss. Sri reconstructs her identity through socially valued work, demonstrating that *sumarah* is inseparable from responsibility, integrity, and self-respect. Acceptance of fate does not lead to passivity; it becomes the ethical foundation for rebuilding life with dignity.

3.2 Discussion

3.2.1 *Sumarah* as Ethical Acceptance and Cultural Resilience in Kayam's *Sri Sumarah*

Ananto (2017) explains that *sumarah* reflects an attitude of surrendering oneself to a higher power, particularly God. This attitude emerges from an awareness of human limitation, vulnerability, and dependence on forces beyond individual control. Nevertheless, such surrender should not be interpreted as weakness. In Javanese ethical philosophy, *sumarah* involves a conscious acceptance that enables individuals to face suffering without losing dignity and purpose.

Kayam explores this ethical dimension through the character of Sri Sumarah, the protagonist of the novella *Sri Sumarah*. The character's name itself symbolically represents the central philosophical theme of the narrative. Sri Sumarah experiences a series of personal and social tragedies that test her ability to maintain emotional and moral strength. After the death of her husband, a teacher who dies while helping villagers affected by an outbreak of eltor disease, Sri Sumarah faces life as a widow who must continue raising her only daughter, Tun.

Her suffering becomes more complex when Tun marries a man associated with the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), creating further social vulnerability during one of the most politically turbulent periods in Indonesian history. In this situation, Sri Sumarah does not possess the power to control external circumstances. However, her response demonstrates the ethical meaning of *sumarah*: she accepts reality while continuing to endure, adapt, and maintain her responsibility as a mother.



This representation challenges the common interpretation of surrender as passivity. Sri Sumarah's *sumarah* is instead an active form of resilience. She does not escape from suffering; rather, she develops an inner capacity to survive through patience, emotional control, and acceptance. Her attitude illustrates what Berkes and Ross (2013) describe as resilience grounded in cultural resources and meaning systems. The strength that enables Sri Sumarah to endure hardship comes not from external power but from an internalized ethical framework.

From the perspective of narrative ethics, Sri Sumarah's character demonstrates how identity is formed through responses to suffering and uncertainty. Ricoeur (1992) argues that narrative identity emerges through the interpretation of human experiences over time. In Kayam's novella, Sri Sumarah's identity is not defined by the tragedies she encounters but by the ethical manner in which she responds to them. Therefore, *sumarah* in *Sri Sumarah* represents more than religious acceptance; it functions as a cultural model of resilience. Kayam presents Javanese ethical philosophy as a resource that enables individuals to negotiate vulnerability, preserve dignity, and continue living meaningfully amid uncontrollable social realities.

3.2.2 Sumarah as Ethical Resilience: The Transformation of Sri Sumarah in Umar Kayam's Novella

Kayam's novella *Sri Sumarah* presents a profound representation of Javanese ethical resilience through the life journey of its female protagonist, Sri Sumarah. The novella portrays a woman whose identity is shaped by Javanese cultural teachings, particularly those related to womanhood, marital responsibility, patience, and acceptance. However, Kayam's narrative does not merely present Sri Sumarah as a passive recipient of traditional values. Instead, the character demonstrates how Javanese ethical principles become resources for surviving personal suffering and historical disruption.

Since childhood, Sri Sumarah is raised by her grandmother after becoming an orphan. Her grandmother educates her according to Javanese ideals of womanhood represented through cultural figures such as Kunti and Sembadra in wayang traditions. Kunti represents maternal strength, wisdom, and devotion, while Sembadra symbolizes loyalty and commitment as an ideal wife. Through these teachings, Sri Sumarah learns the concept of *kasampurnaan berumah tangga* (the perfection of household life), which emphasizes responsibility, emotional control, and harmony within family relationships.

These teachings initially appear to place Sri Sumarah within a traditional gender framework. However, Kayam's narrative gradually reveals that such cultural knowledge also provides her with ethical resources to confront vulnerability. The values instilled by her grandmother become a foundation for her ability to endure crises without losing her sense of dignity and purpose.

Sri Sumarah's marriage to Mas Marto, a teacher, represents a period of happiness that is soon interrupted by tragedy. When their daughter, Tun, is still an infant, Mas Marto dies after helping villagers during a plague outbreak. This moment becomes the first major test of Sri Sumarah's resilience. Instead of remaining trapped in grief, she accepts her fate and focuses on raising her daughter. Her response reflects the meaning of *sumarah*: an attitude of accepting uncontrollable circumstances while continuing to fulfil moral responsibilities.

The second tragedy emerges when Tun becomes involved with Yos, a member of the Indonesian Communist Party's affiliated youth movement, and later becomes connected with Gerwani during a politically turbulent period in Indonesian history. The political conflict surrounding the 1965 events creates devastating consequences for the family. Yos is arrested and killed, while Tun is imprisoned. Once again, Sri Sumarah faces suffering that exceeds personal hardship and enters the realm of collective historical trauma.

Nevertheless, Sri Sumarah's response remains consistent with the ethical principle of *sumarah*. She does not deny suffering, but she refuses to allow suffering to destroy her moral existence. She takes responsibility for raising Tun's child, Ginuk, demonstrating that acceptance is accompanied by action and care. Her resilience emerges through continuous responsibility toward others.



The turning point of Sri Sumarah's life occurs when she dreams of her deceased husband, who reminds her of her ability to become a masseuse. This dream becomes a symbolic moment of self-recovery. Through the work of massage, Sri Sumarah reconstructs her identity and gains economic independence. She does not return to her previous life but creates a new meaningful existence based on the abilities she possesses.

The concept of *pepesthen*, or divine destiny, becomes central to Sri Sumarah's worldview. For her, destiny does not mean surrendering human agency. Instead, it provides a spiritual framework that allows her to maintain hope amid uncertainty. She believes that when one possibility ends, another possibility may still emerge. Thus, *pepesthen* and *sumarah* together create an ethical orientation that transforms suffering into perseverance.

From the perspective of cultural resilience, Sri Sumarah represents a form of resilience rooted in cultural meaning systems. As Berkes and Ross (2013) suggest, resilience is shaped by cultural resources that help individuals interpret and respond to disruption. Sri Sumarah's strength does not originate from external power but from internalized ethical values inherited through Javanese cultural teachings.

Furthermore, the novella contributes to discussions of narrative ethics because Sri Sumarah's identity is constructed through her responses to suffering. Following Ricoeur's (1992) concept of narrative identity, the self is continuously shaped through the interpretation of life experiences. Sri Sumarah is not defined by abandonment, widowhood, or political tragedy; rather, she is defined by her ethical capacity to continue living meaningfully.

Therefore, *Sri Sumarah* demonstrates that Javanese *sumarah* represents more than spiritual acceptance. It functions as an indigenous framework of resilience that integrates patience, responsibility, hope, and moral endurance. Through Sri Sumarah's life journey, Umar Kayam presents a vision of human strength that emerges not from domination over circumstances but from the ability to maintain dignity and compassion within uncertainty.

3.2.3 Sumarah, Gender, and Female Agency: Reconstructing the Javanese Woman Beyond Submission

Kayam's *Sri Sumarah* provides a complex representation of Javanese womanhood by presenting a female character whose life is shaped by traditional gender expectations while simultaneously demonstrating remarkable ethical agency. At first glance, Sri Sumarah appears to embody the ideal Javanese woman commonly associated with obedience, patience, domestic responsibility, and devotion to family. However, Kayam's narrative gradually reveals that these qualities do not necessarily indicate weakness or subordination. Instead, they become cultural resources through which Sri Sumarah negotiates suffering, reconstructs her identity, and maintains autonomy.

However, Kayam's representation of Sri Sumarah moves beyond a simple reproduction of traditional gender ideology. The protagonist's acceptance of her social role becomes a foundation for developing inner strength. Her knowledge of household ethics and emotional discipline enables her to survive circumstances that repeatedly challenge her existence. In this sense, traditional feminine values are transformed from instruments of limitation into resources of resilience.

This interpretation contributes to broader discussions of gender and agency. Agency is not always expressed through direct resistance against social structures; it may also emerge through negotiation, adaptation, and the ability to maintain selfhood within existing cultural frameworks. As Mahmood (2005) argues, agency should not be reduced to resistance alone, because individuals may exercise agency through culturally meaningful practices that appear, from an external perspective, to represent submission.

Sri Sumarah's life illustrates this complex form of agency. After losing her husband, she does not challenge the circumstances through rebellion or confrontation. Instead, she chooses to continue caring for her daughter and maintaining her responsibilities. Her decision represents an active ethical choice rather than passive acceptance. She exercises agency through endurance, responsibility, and the preservation of human relationships.

The most significant demonstration of Sri Sumarah's agency appears after the political tragedy involving her daughter, Tun. The historical violence surrounding the 1965 political conflict places Sri Sumarah in a position of extreme vulnerability. She loses family members, experiences social uncertainty, and must carry the burden of caring for her granddaughter. Nevertheless, she continues to act as a moral subject rather than merely as a victim of history.

Her transformation into a successful masseuse further demonstrates the dynamic nature of her agency. The dream encounter with her deceased husband becomes a symbolic moment of recognition: Sri Sumarah discovers that the abilities cultivated through her previous life can become a source of independence. Massage, traditionally associated with women's domestic knowledge, becomes a means through which she reconstructs her economic and social identity.

This transformation is significant because Kayam does not portray resilience as a sudden escape from suffering. Instead, resilience emerges gradually through accumulated experiences, cultural knowledge, and ethical perseverance. Sri Sumarah's strength develops through the very values that shaped her early life.

From the perspective of cultural resilience, Sri Sumarah represents a model of survival based on continuity and adaptation. Her identity is not destroyed by repeated losses because she possesses a cultural framework that allows her to interpret suffering and maintain hope. The concept of *sumarah* enables her to accept uncertainty while continuing to act responsibly.

3.2.4 Sumarah and Cultural Resilience: From Personal Suffering to Collective Memory

Kayam's *Sri Sumarah* extends beyond the representation of individual suffering by presenting personal tragedy as part of a broader historical and cultural experience. Through Sri Sumarah's life journey, the novella demonstrates how private suffering is connected with collective trauma, particularly the political violence and social uncertainty surrounding the 1965 Indonesian political conflict. However, Kayam does not portray history merely as a source of destruction. Instead, the narrative reveals how cultural values enable individuals to endure historical disruption and reconstruct meaningful lives.

Sri Sumarah's experiences reflect the intersection between personal vulnerability and collective crisis. Her suffering begins with the death of her husband and later intensifies through her daughter's involvement in a politically charged environment. The consequences of the political conflict do not only affect those directly involved but also extend to family members who experience social stigma, fear, and uncertainty. Sri Sumarah becomes a figure who carries the emotional consequences of historical events beyond her personal control.

Nevertheless, the novella does not define Sri Sumarah through victimhood. Instead, Kayam presents her as a subject who transforms suffering into ethical endurance. Her response to repeated misfortunes illustrates the meaning of *sumarah* as a cultural mechanism for maintaining stability amid uncertainty. She acknowledges the existence of forces beyond human control, yet she continues to perform her responsibilities toward her family and community.

This representation corresponds with the concept of cultural resilience, which emphasizes that communities and individuals survive disruption through meaningful cultural resources. Resilience is not simply the ability to return to a previous condition; rather, it involves the reconstruction of meaning after disruption. In Sri Sumarah's case, the philosophy of *sumarah* provides a framework through which suffering becomes understandable and life remains valuable despite irreversible loss.

The concept of *pepesthen* plays an important role in this process. For Sri Sumarah, *pepesthen* refers to the belief that human life is shaped by destiny and divine order. However, this belief does not eliminate personal responsibility. Instead, it creates a balance between acceptance and action. She accepts what cannot be changed while continuing to seek possibilities for a meaningful future. This combination of acceptance and perseverance represents the ethical core of *sumarah*.

From the perspective of narrative ethics, Sri Sumarah's story demonstrates how individuals reconstruct identity through the interpretation of suffering. Ricoeur (1992) suggests that human identity is formed through narrative processes in which experiences are organized

into meaningful stories. Sri Sumarah's identity is therefore not determined by the losses she experiences but by the ethical responses she develops throughout her life.

Furthermore, the novella contributes to discussions of memory studies by showing how literature preserves experiences that may be absent from official historical narratives. The political conflict of 1965 is represented not through political analysis but through its impact on ordinary people and family relationships. Through Sri Sumarah's perspective, Kayam reveals the human consequences of historical events and demonstrates how cultural values help individuals survive collective trauma.

Through the character of Sri Sumarah, Umar Kayam presents *sumarah* as an indigenous ethics of resilience. It is a philosophy that recognizes human vulnerability while affirming the possibility of endurance, compassion, and renewal. The novella demonstrates that resilience does not always appear in the form of resistance or confrontation; sometimes it emerges through patience, care, and the ability to transform suffering into wisdom.

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