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# Structural Analysis of a Tale From Kathmandu

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## Abstract

Folk tales are part and parcel of human life because they have been told and retold in every human society from the time immemorial. Though its not clear when and how they have been an intrinsic part of human life. This is a treasure and specially the treasure of language which have been bestowed by our ancestors. Since the folk tales are part of the folk literature they have drawn the attention of the folklorists. Folklorists have studied, analyzed, interpreted and researched on the different genres of folk literature and the folk tale is one of them. They are simple narrative. They are simple, short and having unique structure which enthrall listeners and also encourage the tellers to tell them again and again nevertheless even at our age of science and technology. Nepali society is multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and diverse in nature. They have their folktales to entertain and heal the psychological burden too. The present research tries to analyze the folktales of Kathmandu/Nepal from the structural approach. The present research claims that the structures of folktales are the main cause of bringing effects on both tellers and the listeners. This research will take help of the idea/theory developed by Vladimir Propp whose *Morphology of Folktale* will be the methodology to analyze the structure of the folktale.

**Keywords:** Folktale, folklore, structure, form, function, narrative

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## Introduction

Folktale is a part of folk literature. It is a story passed down orally from one generation to the another generation. Nepal is a country of diverse cultures, varied ethnic communities and in these communities it has a legacy of rich and varied folklore. Rich culture, social beliefs, traditions and rituals of the common people have made the oral tradition of telling stories very popular among the children, adults and the old. The places of telling stories of these types are: *melas*, *chautaris*, pilgrimage, social gathering, sitting by the hearth at night and even in the classes at schools/colleges as well.

People become enthralled by the narration of folktales. Many a time the same story has been told, retold but both tellers and the listeners are encouraged and enthusiastic respectfully. Folktales are endowed with events and traditions of human life. A famous folklorist of Nepal Janak Lal Sharma writes defining folk tale in *Our Society: A Glimpse* as ". . . events with tradition told or heard from each other is known as folktale" (175). Folktale is told for entertainment. It is an art of telling tale artistically. It has got a unique beginning and ending. It seems quite fascinating with its basic structure different than the written stories. A famous folklorist of Nepal Chudamani Bandhu in his *Aspects of Nepalese Folklore* writes in its uniqueness of telling stories as, "They usually begin with *ekadeshma* (once upon a time) and end with *sunnelai Sunko Mala*, *Bhannelai*

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*Phulko mala, mero katha Baikuntha jala, bhanne belama turunta aula* (pendants to the listeners and garlands to the narrator; while my tale heads to heaven and they come back for another round of story-telling)" (165). Because of having different kinds of structures folktales are "handed down in the speech communities from generation" (165). Folktales are deeply rooted with folk life since they were composed by the folk. Karna Shakya and Linda Griffith define the term 'folktale' in *Tales of Kathmandu* as "The term 'folktale' implied that the tales were composed by the folk, for the folk, about the folk, and belong to the folk" (8). Some folklorists give importance on the popularity of folktales for its richness in fantasy. Bani Roy Chaudhary in *folktales of Kashmir* puts, "In real life we cannot fulfill our desires and what is possible in the stories of fantasy. The common man yearns for riches and comforts he cannot usually look for. He dreams of riches, princess, kingdom etc. and finds satisfaction in stories of fantasy" (IX). Human being lives with hope, imagination, fantasy etc. With the expectations of fulfilling them, folktales enhance their imagination. Janak Lal Sharma also argues in the same line as ". . . in other words folktales (Dante Katha) are those tales which have based on imagination" (175). Narrative interest is another important aspect of folktale. This aspect of tale encourages/motivates the tellers and the listeners of the folktales. Karna Shakya and Linda Griffiths quote Kirk on the importance of narrative in the folktales as, "Folktales are traditional tales of no firmly established form, in which supernatural elements are subsidiary: they are not primarily concerned with 'serious' subjects or the reflection of deep problems and preoccupation; and their first appeal lies in their narrative interest." (13). Narrative techniques, structures, styles etc. are also important aspect for the analysis of the folktales. Shakya and Griffiths further argue on the structure of Nepali folktales which give pleasure to the listeners. They opine, "The structure of the Nepali folktales allows for repetition of the basic themes. This gives pleasure to the listeners . . ." (15). Another renowned folklorist of Nepal Tulasi Diwas writes on the importance of folktale in his *folktales of Nepal* as "The social significance of folktales is innumerable" (3). He further writes on the social responsibility of the folktales as "it is not only to bring the rhyming pattern of the folktale with its beginning of "ekadesh" (once a far off country) and end with 'bhanne lai phulkomala'and 'sunnelai sunkomala' but to fulfill the social duty of the folktale" (3). Folktales and folklife are so deeply interwoven that it seems they can not be disintegrated rather they are identical. Scholars of folktales have thus defined folktales in different contexts. Most of the folktales have caught the experiences of the common people and their day-to-day life and they find direction in the folktales.

Either reading or listening the folktales some questions are born in our mind-why do people of all walk of life kept enthralled by the narration of the folktales? Why doesn't the repetitive story still lose its interest? Why is this oral tradition still popular? Many such questions can be raised while going through the folktales. There should be many reasons– satisfaction that our basic curiosity finds in the folk tales. Or may be it is because it has got very attractive structure or may be it tells the stories of the people.

In this context, the present study tends to see some Nepali folktales how structures in the tales contribute in the making or bringing effect in the tales. There are different methods to reveal the structures of the folktales. One of the renowned American folklorists Alan Dundes drew an influential distinction between the approach of Vladimir Propp and Levi-Strauss. According to Dundes, "Propp focuses on the syntagmatic aspects of structure, while Levi-strauss is concerned with pragmatic structuralism" (Propp: XI-XII). So different folklorists have different approaches

in analyzing the folktales. Robert Scholes in *structuralism in literature* writes about Propp. "For Propp, the unit of structural analysis was the individual tale as a unique construction. From a set of hundred tales of similar configuration he worked on deriving the structure of a master tale, where 31 functions include all of the structural possibilities found in the entire set" (67). Robert Scholes presents different aspects of structuralism in history how they have been developed. He writes, ". . . it is clear that some aspects of structuralism are direct historical developments of formalist ideas and methods." (74).

Viewing the ideas of different structuralists the researcher believes that one of the reasons behind keeping the listeners of all kinds is its structure. The structure which is in the folktales has power to enthrall the listeners. So, the present research delves into a folk tale of Kathmandu and present how the tale is structured. This approach is called structural analysis of the Nepali folktale.

To carry-out the study, the researcher takes help of Vladimir Propp's structural analysis for the analysis of a Nepali folktale. Propp says, "A tale can be described according to its component parts and the relationship of these components to each other and to the whole" (19). Nepali folktales are rich in structures to be analyzed for the structural analysis. Propp in his *Morphology of the Folklore*, writes of endowment of structures in the fairy tales, ". . . fairy tales possess a quite particular structure which is immediately felt and which determines their category even though we may not be aware of it." (6).

Doing this attempt for a structural analysis of a Nepali folktale can be a new in this regard. Though many studies have been made on folktales, as aforementioned, of Nepal but the structural analysis has yet not been applied. Claiming Propp's ground breaking study on folktales of Russia can be an appropriate way to investigate and explore/reveal the structures how they are contributing for the 'relationship of these components to each other and to the whole' (Propp 19). This research will thus try to reveal the narrative structure/form of a Nepali folktale. As it does an analysis through the structural method.

The methodology used here is basically: structural one; and textual analysis is another basic method. Library research and close reading of the text for the application of structuralism will bring the research to the expected conclusion. The present research doesn't include other structuralists' approach. For the structural analysis of a tale the researcher has picked a tale called "Singha Sartha Bahu" from the book *Tales of Kathmandu: Folktales from the Himalayan Kingdom of Nepal* by Karna Shakya and Linda Griffiths.

The research takes time to analyze how Propp's thirty one different functions can be best fitted while analyzing the tales taken for the structural analysis. It is also to see whether /if Propp's reading of the Russian Fairy tales can be applicable in our context. It also reveals whether it is cross-culturally valid.

## Textual Analysis

The story "Singha Sartha Bahu" is a folktale popular in the Kathmandu valley. The text of this story has been taken from *Tales of Kathmandu: Folktales from the Himalayan Kingdom of Nepal* by Karna Shakya and Linda Griffiths. This tale as Robert Scholes says "for structuralism, then, the problems of reading a text involve finding satisfactory ways of incorporating the semantic

dimension within the consideration of structure" (147) can be seen as made up of different structures. The researcher tries to link, as Scholes suggests "to clarify the relationships among in various parts" (144). For a detail analysis of the present tale the researcher attempts the tale from the help of Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the folktale*. Though the tale may not meet all the thirty one functions but as Scholes writes on Propp's discovery of thirty one functions ". . . however many of the thirty one functions a tale had (none has everyone) those that is had always appeared in the same order" (63). The story "Singha Sartha Bahu" begins like other folktales – "Once upon a time in the north of Kathmandu city there lived a merchant named Singha Sartha Bahu." This very beginning of the tale can be applicable in the Propp's "the function of the Dramatis personae" which is the initial situation, designated as  $\alpha$ .

Singha Sartha Bahu, hero, a dramatis personae, remains absent, this situation is the best represented by "one day he (Singha Sartha Bahu) organized five hundreds assistants . . . arrived in a wonderful town (Tibet) . . ." This function begins from Kathmandu to Tibet. It is a kind of absention because the merchant goes on business. This function is designated as  $\beta^1$ .

After their visit God Karunamaya warns Singha Sartha Bahu that this was the town of ogress. God suggests Singha Sartha Bahu "to look at the feet of his beautiful mistress" and he finds the heal and toe of her feet reversed. In the mission of the merchant the arrival of ogress and warning of Karunamaya can best be applicable for the function of interdiction. This interdiction is designated as  $\chi^2$ .

In the 'tale' Karunamaya warns Bahu "under no circumstances should any man look back, otherwise, by their hypnotic magic, the 'Laksin' would bring the men to their death". This warning made by Karunamaya, God, is violated as follows: ". . . by their mistresses' cries, and could not stop themselves from looking back . . . traders were devoured by 'Laksins (Ogress)" this function is designated by  $\delta$ .

Ogress in the tale is considered a villain. God Karunamaya warns Singha Sartha Bahu of the Ogress. After having learned of the feet reversed traders decide to come back to Kathmandu. In this situation the ogresses directly receive information. This function is called delivery which is one of the functions of thirty-one functions as developed by Propp which is designated as  $S'$ .

'Villainy' is another important function of a folktale. The villain causes harm or injury to a member of a family. The ogresses try to persuade the traders, "The easily persuaded traders were moved by their mistresses' cries, and could not stop themselves from looking back. But the moment they did so, the ogresses grabbed them by their pigtails and dragged them off the horse, where they proceeded to eat them. Thus, with the exception of Bahu, all the five hundred traders were devoured." This function of the tale is closer to the villainy. The traders are the members of the same community. They are killed by ogresses means, killed by the villains. The villainous activity performed by the ogresses functions as villainy that is designated as –  $A^{14}$ .

Traders' death in this context invites the hero to be prepared for the counteraction. Not only the traders were killed but also the ogress "called all her sisters, any they devoured everyone in the palace" suggests that counter-action is necessarily necessary to save himself and the people of Kathmandu. This function is designated as -  $C$ . To take the action against the ogresses Singha Sartha Bahu acquires a magical agent. The agent, here a sword, which is directly transferred. This function in the tale as Vladimir Propp discovers as 'a magical agent', designated as -  $F'$ .

After receiving the magical agent the hero (here, Singha Sartha Bahu) is prepared to 'fight against the ogresses'. Bahu fights "Single handed, he beheaded most of the ogresses with the extraordinary sword given to him by God Karunamaya. The rest of the ogresses were so terrified at his powers that they flew back to Tibet and never against dared to come back to Nepal." The very function of the tale as discovered by Propp in his *Morphology of the folktale* is designated as - **H**<sup>1</sup>.

Singha Sartha Bahu kills most of the ogresses with the help of the magical agent. This function is designated as **I5** because the villain/s is/are killed (defeated) by the hero.

We find the hero in a new appearance after defeating the ogresses. In the folktales the hero comes across the many obstacles and seizes the object of a search. Though the specific object is not searched by Singha Sartha Bahu but his transformation from a merchant to victorious hero. This function is known transfiguration in the Propp's discovery which is designated as - **T**<sup>1</sup>.

In the folktales we find the Villains punished. Soe Marlar Lwin, a folklorist of Singapore quotes Grayson in his "Revisiting a Structural Analysis of Folktales : A Means to an End?" as ". . . a set of folktales which are composed of parallel sets of contrasting narratives showing how good actions are rewarded and evil actions are punished" (77). Singha Sartha Bahu also can be considered as dramatic personae who is rewarded because of good actions. Whereas the villain/s is/are punished. The function as discovered by Propp is applicable with punishment to ogresses which is designated as - **U**.

Singha Sartha Bahu, as a dramatic personae, plays a very important role to bring a chaotic situation of Kathmandu under his control. He proves himself an extraordinary person who with his magical power defeats the ogresses. Since there was no longer had any ruler, the people of Kathmandu "Chose Singha Sartha Bahu as their King. He ruled wisely for many years, and made all the people happy". One of the functions Propp discovered in *The Morphology of the Folktale* e.g. 'Ascends the throne' is the best applicable in this context. This function is designated as- **W**\*\*.

The 'Tale' "Singha Sartha Bahu" is a Nepali folktale which has got the structure endowed with its own elements for making the text readable through the objective approach. For the objective interpretation of a text Scholes writes "A text is endowed with its own elements and . . . these elements, devices, forms etc. are interconnected to make the text a complete whole" (25) The present tale 'Singha Sartha Bahu' is not an exception in this regard from the elements contributing for making the story a complete whole.

## Conclusion

This paper has examined the folktale from the structural approach. From this approach a folktale is taken as a complete whole with its own elements. From the structural analysis those components are explored since structuralism is a method of interpretation and analysis on the relationships of elements and contribute to reveal the connection between those elements and see how these elements interconnect to make a story complete in itself. Establishing connections, exploring relationships between the elements of the folktale and analyzing those relationship for the better understanding of the nature and power of the story is the base of the present study.

Having its narrative feature it has got a power to enthrall the listeners from the time immemorial. This power of attraction, spellbind and power to motivate the listeners, certainly, have encouraged to carry out the research. Folktales have been narrated all over the world to entertain, educate, transmit the traditions, cultural values etc. to the future generation.

The present research believes that the power to enthrall the listeners is the structures of the tale which produce the effects when the tellers tell it. So the researcher has explored those elements and to explore and analyze the 'tale' a Nepali folktale called "Singha Sartha Bahu" has been taken from the book *Tales of Kathmandu: Folktales from the Himalayan Kingdom of Nepal* by Karna Shakya and Linda Griffith. The research has tried to explore the elements how they have contributed for the overall composition of the folktale. The analysis has focused on the structural function identified by a renowned Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp. The way it deals with a folktale is an objective method. This method tries to explore the elements of the tale and the interconnectedness of those elements to produce the meaning. In the story "Singha Sartha Bahu" the elements which have contributed in making of the folktale. The structural functions discovered by Propp are quite applicable in the tale of Kathmandu, Nepal.

In the Folktale "Singha Sartha Bahu", we find Singha Sartha Bahu, a merchant from the north of Kathmandu, is a dramatic personae goes on business. The structural function, in this regard, is 'absent'. The designation of his function is  $\beta'$ . The merchant and his assistants face obstacles after absentation. The merchant encounters the ogress on the way which is an interdiction, designated as  $Y^2$ . Interdiction is violated when the assistants turned their heads back which was against the God Karunamaya which is designated as  $S$ . The merchant as a dramatis personae meets an ogress/ogresses, a villainous character. So, they devour the assistants of the merchant. The structural function is designated as  $S^1$ . Analyzing the 'tale' of Singha Sartha Bahu we find villainy of the ogresses who cruelly devour the assistants who were first considered as their lovers. This function is designated as  $A^{14}$ . The tale is structured to come across the villainy. So the merchant is to overpower the Ogresses, the villainous characters. Then the magical agent, which is acquired from the God Karunamaya, magically is designated with  $F'$ . The fierce encounter with the ogresses is designated as  $H'$ . Singha Sartha Bahu kills the ogress which is designated as  $I^5$ . Singha Sartha Bahu, the merchant, has been transfigured by his role performed in the tale. His role as a victorious hero, which is designated as  $T'$ . The structure of the tale develops towards punishment and later the reward. Singha Sartha Bahu gradually deserves the role to be ascended to the position of the King. Which is another structural function in Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale*. Finally the ascend to the power as a king is designated as  $W^*$ .

Thus, the folktale "Single Sartha Bahu", one of the folktales of Kathmandu, Nepal is found well-structured in the Propp's structural function discovered in this *Morphology of the Folktale*. The elements found in a Nepali folktale can also contribute in making the folktale a complete whole. This kind of objective analysis of a tale of Nepal can help for opening the analytical study of the different genres of folktales of Nepal with the help of structuralism which has not been practiced yet in our academia.

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