



Investigation of folktale dramatis personae on a selected Malaysian folktale to test and visualize its applicability and pattern in the Malaysian context

Harryizman Harun

Universiti Utara Malaysia, Malaysia; Email: harry@uum.edu.my

Article History

Received: 19 February 2018

Accepted: 03 April 2018

Published: April 2018

Citation


Harryizman Harun. Investigation of folktale dramatis personae on a selected Malaysian folktale to test and visualize its applicability and pattern in the Malaysian context. *Indian journal of arts*, 2018, 8, 68-73

Publication License



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

General Note

 Article is recommended to print as color digital version in recycled paper.

ABSTRACT

Dramatis personae of a folktale is a part of the morphology of folktale which advocates the analysis of folktales based on structure instead of theme and motif. Among others, it works as markers in assisting the identification of embedded structures in a folktale. Nevertheless, the theory from which the dramatis personae originates is foreign to Malaysian context. It raises questions whether the dramatis personae is entirely applicable to Malaysian folktales and what is the pattern once it is applied to a folktale of a different culture. Thus, the objectives of the study are to test the applicability of the dramatis personae on a select Malaysian folktale and once tested, to visualise the pattern of the dramatis personae applied. Qualitative text analysis (QTA) method is employed as a vehicle that propels the investigation assisted by Atlas.ti, a computer-aided qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) to enhance validity and reliability of the test conducted. Central to this article, the applicability, and the visualisation of the dramatis personae

pattern in Malaysian context are hoped to shed lights on the operation of the theory beyond the circumference of the inaugurate culture.

Keywords: folktale dramatis personae, folktale morphology, Malaysian folktale, dramatis personae pattern visualisation

1. INTRODUCTION

The scientific study of a folktale is fundamentally divided into three doctrines: type, motif, and function (Propp, 1998; Thompson, 1966; Uther, 2011). The study of type and motif revolves around the content of folktale and the function, the structure. The current study was initially triggered by the third doctrine: the function (Propp, 1998). The function is the embedded structure which scaffolds the entire content of folktale. It is claimed that the function persists in folktales. The primary aim of such study is to provide objective method of analysing folktales toward classification, which is basics in any domains of knowledge (Harun, 2017). In order to do so, the functions work as a tool to analyse and objectively classify folktales.

Dramatis personae is introduced to assist with the identification of the functions entrenched in the folktales, and it was the nucleus of the current study (Lwin, 2010). Nevertheless, the theory of the morphology of folktales is based on the Russian folklore studies, and the dramatis personae application was tested on a collection of folktales from the same nation. Considering the context in which the current study took place, it was a question worthy of asking whether the dramatis personae is applicable in the context of Malaysia which laden with a distinct culture. Once applied, the conundrum of its pattern of the application on a Malaysian folktale was also worth to investigate. As an effort to investigate the questions posed, the applicability of the dramatis personae was tested on a select Malaysian folktale, and as an outcome, a pattern of the application was visualised to present the dramatis personae application in the Malaysian folktale. The applicability and the visualisation of the pattern of the select Malaysian folktale become the gist of the article. The article begins with the current section, the introduction. Following is some background on the study conducted entails by the methodology that drives the study. The analysis and results, and the discussion of the results obtained come next, and the article end with a conclusion on the study. The subsequent section presents the background of the study and related works.

1.1. Background

The morphology of folktale is invented by Vladimir Propp, a Russian folklorist, and theorist. His works and contributions on folklore domain converged on a structural analysis and classification of folktales that is the analysis of the action of folktale dramatis personae (actor) known as the functions (Propp, 1998). In total, 31 functions are invented, and it is asserted that they flow in the exact order in a tale as a basic structure. It is stipulated that the arrangement of the structure does not falter in the case where some of the functions are lacking. Moreover, the use of functions to fabricate folktale type is said to be more accurate than theme, which is claimed to be ambiguous and verbose. Subsequently, a type of folktale can be produced by populating the folktales with the similar functions.

Following the functions are the seven dramatis personae in a tale. The dramatis personae are the principal characters in a tale that comprises the distribution of functions in a logical manner. Even though the function is used instead of its performer or object reliant on them to classify folktale, Propp (1998) lucidly states that it is important to know how functions are distributed among the seven dramatis personae. It helps in identifying the structures in the folktale. The dramatis personae are Villain, Donor (Provider), Helper, Princess (a sought-for person) and her Father, Dispatcher, Hero, and False Hero. The following subsection offers sums of folktale related studies with various motives which employed the dramatis personae as ones of the analysis tool. The purpose is to showcase its importance in any studies which use the 31 functions in understanding and identifying the internal structure of folktales.

1.2. Related Works

Four previous studies that utilised the dramatis personae are elected in the context of this article. The first study worked on narrative structures in Burmese folktales (Lwin, 2010). The study's primary objective was to identify various structural patterns in the Burmese folktales using the 31 morphological functions of Propp. The folktales with the similar structural pattern were clustered together. In the course of extracting the functions from the folktales, the dramatis personae and each of its function distribution were adapted as a tool to identify the embedded structure in the Burmese folktales. Next is the study that involves the use of Propp's morphological functions to develop a system that able to produce stories from the essence of Russian folktales (Gervás, 2013). The 31 functions were employed to construct a logical representation of the story but all the same, it is found that before developing the functions,

the dramatis personae were also utilised to comprehend the actual distribution of functions in a story. The same goes for a study conducted to analyse the fairy tale *Sleeping Beauty* and compare it with the Russian folktales. The analysis also engaged the 31 functions and the dramatis personae with its specific function distribution to assist with the functions identification in the folktales chosen as data in the study (Ihsan, 2016). The primary purpose of the study was to observe whether all the functions and dramatis personae imposed in theory persist in tales outside the culture of Russia, similar to the current study, and it is discovered the notion is applicable but not to its full extent. The last previous study chosen investigated on a film entitled *Belle de Jour* to determine whether the movie falls in a fairy tale genre or not (Sprigg, 2015). In order to do so, it was critically compared to the famous fairy tale, *Little Red Riding Hood* using Propp's morphology of folktale. The comparison was made to observe whether the film shares the same structures and essential characters too. The 31 functions of the folktale morphology and the dramatis personae identification were employed as tools of analysis to compare the two tales.

Having expounded on the four previous related studies on tales concisely, it is apparent that the study of folktale that involved the Propp's morphological elements is always about the functions and the dramatis personae. As can be seen, the dramatis personae is vital and beneficial in the analysis of folktale toward the identification of folktale's internal structure. In the context of the present study, discovering the application and pattern of the dramatis personae in the Malaysian setting helps to understand the persistence of such theory in the local culture. Having said that, the following section enlightens the methodology of the study.

2. METHODOLOGY

In order to investigate the application and pattern of Propp's dramatis personae in the context of Malaysia, a Malaysian folktale entitled *The Green Horse* was selected as data that deemed fits the purpose of the current study. The folktale was picked from a collection of Malaysian folktale collected and retold in literary form because it is evidently underlined that the choice of folktale for structural investigation cannot be made at an individual's discretion but must be imposed from without (Propp, 1998; Puteh & Said, 2010). As for the method to analyse the data, qualitative text analysis (QTA) method was utilised (Kuckartz, 2014; Schreier, 2012, 2013). The QTA was implemented in the environment of Atlas.ti to warrant the validity and reliability of the investigation (Friese, 2014). As for the visualisation of the pattern, it was achieved through the use of the Network View utility in Atlas.ti (Harun & Jamaludin, 2017). The QTA method, which is triggered by the questions imposed in the study, comprised of five phases.

The first phase is the reading and interpretation of the text. In the context of the current study, *The Green Horse* was thoroughly read to locate the characters in the particular folktale. Then, the characters' role in the folktale was interpreted by the context in the folktale. The second phase is the development of categories. Based on the seven dramatis personae of the folktale morphology, seven categories of code with one additional residual category named as Miscellaneous were developed deductively as a coding scheme of the study. The Miscellaneous category was needed to contain any insignificant characters that appear in the folktale and not covered by the dramatis personae. Once the coding scheme was obtained, the folktale was segmented according to the characters identified in the first phase, and then each of the segments was coded using the categories from the coding scheme in order to determine whether the dramatis personae were applicable in the setting of the folktale. After the coding of the folktale had been completed, the codes which represented the dramatis personae were analysed to discover answers to the questions imposed. The method ends with the presentation of the results of the analysis: the applicability and the visual representation of the dramatis personae pattern in *The Green Horse*. That said, the ensuing section exhibits the analysis conducted and the results attained.

3. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Based on the analysis performed, it is found that the folktale analysed has nine characters in total. The characters are King Malikul Rais, the queen (the nameless late wife to the king), Princess Cahaya Puspita (the new queen), the green horse (the eldest son and prince), Prince Malikul Munir (the youngest son and prince), the nameless King of Nilam Utama country, and Princess Cahaya Purnama, Pancaran Sinar and Bintang Mengerdip (the three princesses of Nilam Utama). In interpreting the characters and employing the seven dramatis personae and its function distribution in the analysis, several discoveries were made. The first is the dramatis personae are not applicable to the late queen and two of the princesses of Nilam Utama (Cahaya Purnama and Pancaran Sinar) which resulted all three characters were subsumed under the residual category. Second, the rest of the characters were successfully coded with six of out the seven categories of the dramatis personae. One dramatis personae is found missing in the folktale: the False Hero. Regarding the pattern of the dramatis personae application in the folktale, a visualisation as in Figure 1 reveals a different chronicle. It is found that a single character can assume more than one dramatis personae. For instance, King Malikul Rais was coded to two categories of the dramatis personae: Villain and Dispatcher.

Meanwhile, it is also acknowledged from the analysis that more than one character can be assumed under one dramatis personae category, in particular, Princess Cahaya Puspita and King Malikul Rais who were coded to the Villain category. The next

discovery is that the King of Nilam Utama and Princess Bintang Mengerdip coexist and share the same dramatis personae: Princess (a sought-for person) and/or her Father. Since the category represents the daughter and the father, the two characters were coded to the dramatis personae in a pair. In the end, it is noted that though the title of the folktale is *The Green Horse*, the hero in the folktale is by no means titular. It is because the green horse was not coded to the Hero dramatis personae but his younger brother instead: Prince Malikul Munir. With that, the next section offers the discussion of the study.

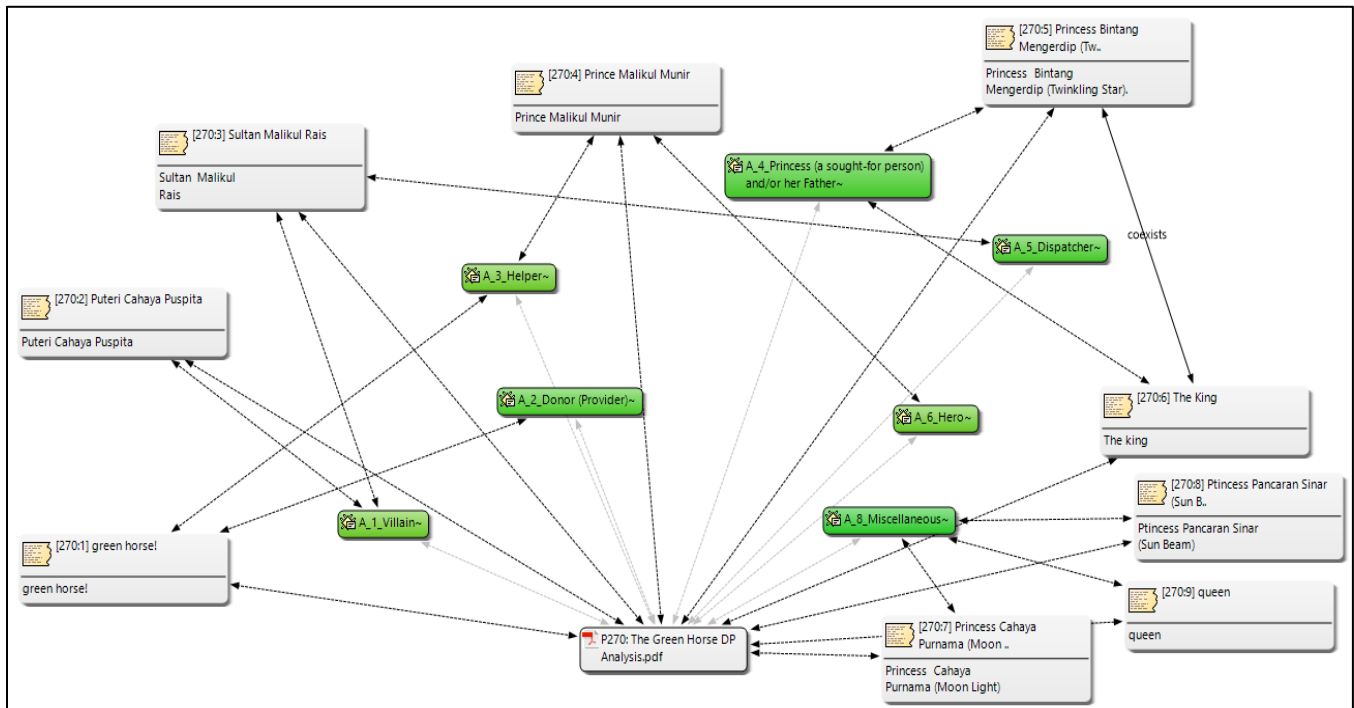


Figure 1 Visual Representation of Dramatis Personae Pattern in *The Green Horse* Folktale

4. DISCUSSION

From the analysis and the results obtained, deductions can be made. Foremost, the dramatis personae are only applicable to important characters in the folktale. The nameless queen and also the two elder sisters of Princess Bintang Mengerdip were coded to the Miscellaneous category because they played little roles in the folktale without any acts that influenced the structure of the story. Second, not all the seven dramatis personae were managed to be applied. The False Hero category is an exception. The False Hero usually appears at the end of the folktale to falsely undertake the identity of the Hero to steal the reward. However, *The Green Horse* lacks such a dramatis personae. Once the hero solved the tasks given by the king, he was rewarded, and the folktale ends without any intervention of a false hero. The pattern visualisation provides much detail deductions from the folktale. A single character can assume two dramatis personae. In the folktale, King Malikul Rais tried to murder his son, the green horse hence coded to the Villain category. However, he was also the one who sent the green horse and the hero off (unconsented) thus coded to the Dispatcher category too. Vice versa, single dramatis personae can also be applied to two different characters. To cite an instance, Princess Cahaya Puspita (the stepmother to the green horse) incited King Malikul Rais to murder his son and the king out of love for his new queen, agreed to be an accomplice. Therefore, both of the characters were coded to the Villain category. It is also acknowledged that the duo nature of Princess (a sought-for person) and/or her Father dramatis personae exists in the folktale analysed. The dramatis personae are inseparable because the father usually is the one who triggers a special task and the daughter is the reward. The same applies in *The Green Horse*. The King of Nilam Utama held a ceremony to find husbands for his three daughters, and a flower was the means to do so. Whoever receives the flower also receives the respective princess, and that was how Princess Bintang Mengerdip, the youngest one met the hero, Prince Malikul Munir. One last interesting deduction made is the choice of title of the folktale. Considering the title is *The Green Horse*, it was intrinsically presumed that the green horse was the hero of the folktale. Nevertheless, from the analysis and the pattern visualised, it is noticed that the green horse was just the Helper and the Donor. Considering the stepmother and the king planned to murder him, the first prince, it was assumed that the same fate would befall the young prince. Hence, the green horse helped deliver his younger brother from harm. In addition, he also functioned as the Donor. To elevate Prince Malikul Munir's status quo as equal as Princess Bintang Mengerdip's, the green horse magically

summoned fabulous clothing and a settlement complete with a castle for the wedding. In actuality, the Hero was Prince Malikul Munir, the younger brother. He was the one who went through hardship working as a cleaner at Nilam Utama's castle after escaping death sentence with his elder brother, the green horse and eventually married Princess Bintang Mengerdip and lived happily ever after. Having discussed that, the following subsection explains the implication and the limitations of the study.

4.1. Implication and limitation

Outside Malaysia, folklore in general and folktale notably are recognised as scientific domain and worthy of critical investigations. The study of folktale morphology with its functions and dramatis personae as units of coding is one of the branches of such investigation. It is claimed to offer an objective perspective on a matter which is known to be studied subjectively: story. The dramatis personae which are the crux of the current study and this article provides a tool for investigators to dissect and study folktales systematically and works as markers to identify innate structures in folktales known as the functions. Admittedly, stories are laden with the unique culture of the native country, and since the theory that produced the dramatis personae originates from Russia, the current investigation conducted with the local data reveals intriguing discoveries as elaborated in the discussion section. The application of the dramatis personae is found to be possible, but there are deviations in such a process as plainly illustrated by the pattern visualised (Figure 1). Such discovery is crucial because the dramatis personae influence the function distribution. Seeing that the theory claims that the functions suggested appearing in sequence in a folktale, the deviations in the dramatis personae's application speak volumes of the sequence of functions in the Malaysian folktales than the Russians. Therefore, the deviations in its application in the Malaysian folktales implicitly indicates differences in the sequence of functions too.

However, the study conducted is far from perfect. There are limitations noted which could be improved in future studies. The study was conducted on a select Malaysian folktale, to begin with, and therefore generalisation cannot be made. In defence, it was not the aim of the study in the first place to generalise the discoveries made but to test the application of the foreign folktale related theory in the local context. Still, with more local data, generalisation is not impossible. Second, the analysis performed was from a single coder's perspective, and the coding process was conducted once. It is by no means incorrect, but to increase quality and preserve consistency in interpreting the data, intercoder or intracoder agreement is advisable (Drisko & Maschi, 2016; Schreier, 2013).

5. CONCLUSION

The study was driven by the two questions enquiring whether the dramatis personae of the folktale morphology is wholly applicable to Malaysian folktales and what is the pattern of its application in a different culture. The questions had prompted the two objectives: to test the applicability of the dramatis personae on a select Malaysian folktale and to visualise the pattern of the application. The first discovery answers and achieves the first question and the first objective respectively. It is established that the dramatis personae apply to the Malaysian folktale analysed but not in entirety. The second discovery answers and achieves the second question and the second objective correspondingly. The visualisation of the dramatis personae application has disclosed a unique network of pattern that conveys an intriguing account regarding the existence of the dramatis personae which are natively Russian in the Malaysian folktale. The two discoveries ready a platform for further studies to seek answers in order to fathom the nature of the dramatis personae presence in the Malaysian folktales and how they endure from Russia to Malaysia. As future works, more local folktales as data are to be analysed to gain wide-ranging perspective toward generalisation of the answers at hand. Additionally, double-coding of the data is strongly suggested to enhance the quality of the results and preserve the consistency of the data interpretation.

REFERENCE

1. Drisko, J., & Maschi, T. (2016). *Content analysis* (T. Tripodi Ed. 1sted.). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
2. Friese, S. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis with ATLAS. ti*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
3. Gervás, P. (2013). *Propp's morphology of the folk tale as a grammar for generation*. Paper presented at the OASIS-OpenAccess Series in Informatics.
4. Harun, H. (2017). *Malaysian folktale classification and digitization* (Unpublished doctoral thesis), Universiti Utara Malaysia, Malaysia.
5. Harun, H., & Jamaludin, Z. (2017). Structural semantic folktale model as a visualization means of structural and semantic relationships between Malaysian folktales' classe. In Z. Jamaludin & N. H. Zakaria (Eds.), *The 6th International Conference of Computing & Informatics* (pp. 291-298). Kuala Lumpur: Sintok: School of Computing.
6. Ihsan, P. (2016). The sleeping beauty fairy tale: An analysis on Propp's the functions of dramatis personae. *TELL*, 3(1).

7. Kuckartz, U. (2014). *Qualitative text analysis: A guide to methods, practice and using software*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
8. Lwin, S. M. (2010). *Narrative structures in Burmese folk tales*. Amherst, NY: Cambria Press.
9. Propp, V. (1998). *Morphology of the folktale* (14th ed.). Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
10. Puteh, O., & Said, A. (2010). *366 a collection of Malaysian folk tales* (12 ed.). Cheras, Kuala Lumpur: Utusan Publications and Distributors Sdn Bhd.
11. Schreier, M. (2012). *Qualitative content analysis in practice* (1sted.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
12. Schreier, M. (2013). Qualitative content analysis. In F. Uwe (Ed.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative data analysis* (pp. 171-183). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications Ltd.
13. Sprigg, S. C. (2015). *Can we consider "Belle de Jour" a fairy tale?: A study based on Vladimir Propp's Morphology of the Folktale* (Doctoral thesis), University of British Columbia. Retrieved from <https://open.library.ubc.ca/cIRcle/collections/24/items/1.0167715>
14. Thompson, S. (1966). *Motif-index of folk-literature* (Vol. 1-6). Morton St. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
15. Uther, H.-J. (2011). *The Types of International Folktales: A Classification and Bibliography* (2nded. Vol.1). Helsinki, Finland: Academia Scientiarum Fennica.