# An Analysis of the Sesotho Folktale *Kgubetswana Le Talane* Using the Binary Opposition Approach

**Pule Phindane**
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6459-1642
Central University of Technology, Free State, South Africa
pphindane@cut.ac.za

## Abstract

This study is based on an analysis of the Sesotho folktale *Kgubetswana le Talane*. The folktale is analysed using the theory of binary opposition. This theory is also consolidated with Vladimir Propp's approach to folktales, which is used to analyse the meanings of symbols and character roles in the story. The implications of the differences and similarities of *Kgubetswana le Talane* with other folktales are discussed. Efforts to interpret the meanings of symbols in the story were also made by analysing the animal characters and examining these animal symbols through the understanding of the Basotho culture. The paradox between the protagonist and the antagonist is essential in the creation of the story and its themes.

**Keywords:** characters; folklore; symbolic meaning; binary opposition

## Introduction

It is generally acknowledged that literary works mirror life in society based on its social ideology. The nature of folktales as literary works is such that they are anonymous, meaning that their authors and exact date are unknown. Folktales are owned by illiterate societies, children, men and women, grandfathers and grandmothers. They are thus stories that live among the people. They are inherited from generation to generation orally. As this is the case, they change easily, and they can be adopted to other forms even though their form and formulas are stable (Phindane 2014, 123).

*Kgubetswana le Talane* is one of many Sesotho folktales (this includes *Mosimodi le Mosimotsana* and *Masilo le Masilonyana*) that present both themes of jealousy and wickedness. It can be compared with the French fairy tale "Toads and Diamonds" by Charles Perrault, the English fairy tale "The Two Sisters," "Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters" (Zimbabwean folktale), "The Talking Eggs" (a Louisiana folktale), the Korean fairy tale *Kongjee-Patjee*, etc., in the sense that, in all these folktales, there is a

theme based on the binary opposition between the protagonist and the antagonist (i.e. good and bad).

In *Kgubetswana le Talane* we can see the conflict between the protagonist (Kgubetswana) and the antagonist (Talane). Talane presents the negative while her sister Kgubetswana embodies everything that is positive. The protagonist represents a "good" character—one who in most cases earns the readers' sympathy more. On the other hand, the antagonist represents an "evil" and "bad" character. In its function, the protagonist always wins the conflict and becomes an ideal character (Gyem 2011, 167).

The main issue investigated in this study is the significance of binary oppositions in stories that involve animals and also to answer the following research questions:

1.  Why do folktales comprise an opposition between a protagonist and an antagonist (which is mentioned in the concept of binary opposition)?

2.  What is the relationship between one character and the others?

3.  What is the significance of the use of symbols?

This study will also discuss aesthetic features, the concept of binary opposition and the functional theory based on Propp's elucidation.

## Literature Review

### Features of Folklores

The function analysis of characters and themes, which is implemented in this article, was explored by Vladimir Propp in his influential study of the functions of Russian legends and folktales (Propp 1958, xi). Propp offers 31 functions in his study of Russian folktales (Propp 1958, 28). The functions that Propp suggested are becoming more popular throughout the world. It is therefore not surprising that discussions of these functions are continuing even in these new dispensations. Literary critics are also exploring these functions as resources for the analysis of folktales.

According to Gyem (2011, 167–68), folklore varies from other written forms of literary works because it has the following features:

* the distribution and inheritance are usually in the form of an oral story, passed down from one generation to the next;

* it has a traditional character, which is inherited in a relatively stable form or in a standard format;

* it has various versions and variants;

* it is anonymous (unknown authors);

* it usually has a formula or format;

* it plays an important role in society as a medium of entertainment, education, social behaviour or for the projection of the future;

* the story is pre-logic, meaning it has its own logic, which is not suitable with common logic;

* it belongs to a "certain community"—as a result of its anonymous author, people in the society claim the story;

* it is commonly verbal and natural, and that makes it seem abrupt and spontaneous.

According Creany (2013, 29), "animal tales assume a variety of literary forms, including fables, pourquoi tales, beast tales, and transformation tales, such as animal bride stories." Lukens, Smith, and Coffel (2013) aver that the objective of fables is to teach a lesson and by their nature they are didactic. In the story discussed in this article, the characters personify animals who display traits of human behaviour. There is also no development of characters as they merely highlight how certain behaviours can lead to consequences.

According to Mota (2009, 25), for the IsiZulu nation, "folktale is regarded as a living art which expands and upholds certain IsiZulu norms and values which form the cultural framework." In other words, folktales are regarded as a warehouse of the way the IsiZulu nation views the world. They are also used to teach and instruct young children about the IsiZulu culture.

Makgamatha (1989) applied the Levi-Straussian theory to the folktale *Masilo le Masilwane* to investigate the sequential structure in its context. In this study, Makgamatha (1989, 106) confirms Levi-Strauss's argument that folktales are miniature myths, and that the same oppositions that are found in myths are transposed to a smaller scale in folktales—and this is what makes them difficult to study.

In his study of Setswana folktales, Swanepoel (1983) emphasises the structure and the functions of formulae (i.e. the opening and the closing of a folktale). According to Mota (2009, 42), the opening formula is defined as a sentence or sentences used to announce the outset of the folktale.

**The Symbolic Characterisation of Animals in a Folktale**

In his *Introduction to African Oral Literature*, Fred Akporobaro (2004) provides an extensive study on the folktale form of folklore. Although considerable work was done on his side in examining the stories' themes, visions and motifs, little attention was given to the symbolic representation of the characters in the folktales he collected. Among others, he ornately examines themes which include greediness, ungratefulness, bravery, cruelty, cunning, abhorrence, love, and foolishness. He consequently mentioned animals as having symbolic roles without exploring the rudiments of these.

Isidore Okpewho (1992, 101), in *African Oral Literature: Background, Character, and Continuity*, defines a symbol as a "concrete or familiar object that is used in reference to, or as an explanation of, an abstract idea or less familiar object or event." In his study, "Symbolism in Oral Literature," Philip Etyang (2010) focused mainly on the Kaguru people in discussing symbolism in oral literature. He documented wide-ranging and different animal symbols in Kaguru tradition, such as the elephant, lion, crocodile, chameleon, ogre, monkey and birds, and what they symbolise. On the other side, Luke Eyoh (2002) studied animal symbolism as an indicator of cultural unity in Nigeria. He examined two cultures (i.e. Ibibio and Ijaw) and showed the similarities between their animal symbolism in J. P. Clark-Bekederemo's poetry.

Fables are one type of popular folklore. This simply implies that almost every nation has fables, including the Basotho. Most folktales have similarities, familiarities and differences. Makgamatha (1993, 60) observed in a study of the trickster tale that small or weak animals, or even ones that have an appearance that could encourage other animals to despise it, are often used as tricksters. The small and weak animal usually tricks a big or fearful animal, e.g. in *Taumoholo le Mmutlanyana* ("The Lion and the Hare"), *Phokojwe le Phiri* ("The Jackal and the Wolf") and *Tshwene le Kwena* ("The Baboon and the Crocodile"), etc. So, in animal stories there is always an animal that holds the main and important role. Animals such frogs, turtles, birds, bees, and snakes are always viewed as little and weak animals. Animals as symbols of wisdom can provide humans with wisdom for their lives.

In Sesotho culture, generally, the cow is a symbol of prosperity and is seen as a sympathetic creature. That's why there is a saying in Sesotho, *Modimo o nko e metsi* ("A water-nosed God"). In simple terms, this means a cow is very important in every household because apart from its hide and meat, it is used to plough in the fields and as a mode of transportation to deliver heavy loads. The success of an individual was measured by his cattle. In the folktale *Kgubetswana le Talane*, the calves symbolise freedom and happiness or satisfaction when they run around peacefully. Another animal is the frog (*Nketjwane*). This animal is not good-looking or beautiful but has a good heart and kindness. The symbol of the frog is correlated with rain, and food in abundance. It is often alleged that whenever a frog cries, the rain will come. This symbol also comes from the farming culture of the Basotho. Most of the stories give messages that good deeds will be rewarded, and bad deeds will be punishment.

**Binary Opposition**

Ahmadi et al. (2013, 724) observed that "one of the most important applications in structural and post-structural criticism is binary opposition in which the essence of everything is revealed through opposition with another thing that has no quality at all."

Levi-Strauss's theory proposes that binary oppositions can be identified in narratives and that they aid our understanding of opposing concepts; for example, "the

understanding of a word like 'coward' depends on its opposing idea, 'hero' likewise, 'good and bad,' 'light and darkness, 'boy and girl' and so on" (Madu 2016, 203). Levi-Strauss's approach, according Madu (2016, 203), emphasises the "fact that one side of the pair often appears to be more valuable to a society than the other," for example, honesty and dishonesty. "One analyzes a text, therefore, by being able to identify the appropriation of these binaries as well as their correlates in a text" (Madu 2016, 203).

Alan Dundes (1997, 46), is his article "Binary Opposition in Myth: The Propp/Levi-Strauss Debate in Retrospect," argued that binary opposition is a universal phenomenon. He presumes that all human societies, past and present, made some kind of distinction between male and female, life and death. The implication is that we will certainly find binary oppositions in genres of folklore other than myth and folktale.

Lacey (2000) observed that in any given narrative, the hero and the villain present a binary opposition, where the hero will portray good attributes and the villain, in opposition, will portray bad attributes.

In this article, the analysis of the folktale *Kgubetswana le Talane* will not use Levi-Strauss's theory, but it will follow Propp's structural narratemes and actantial units. The concept of binary opposition in this study involves two contradictory features and through a dynamic process this dualistic opposition facilitates the understanding of literary works (Gyem 2011, 169). In this article, two features cover the concept of binary opposition: the protagonist and the antagonist. In the story they are Kgubetswana (the protagonist) and Talane (the antagonist). The character that the main events of the story revolve around is called the main character or the protagonist. The protagonist always becomes famous in the story. Kgubetswana is illustrated as doing good deeds. From the beginning she heeds the advice of different characters. Kgubetswana has a connection with all the other characters; the other characters are isolated and have no connection with each other. The connection between Kgubetswana as protagonist and the other characters can be illustrated as follows:
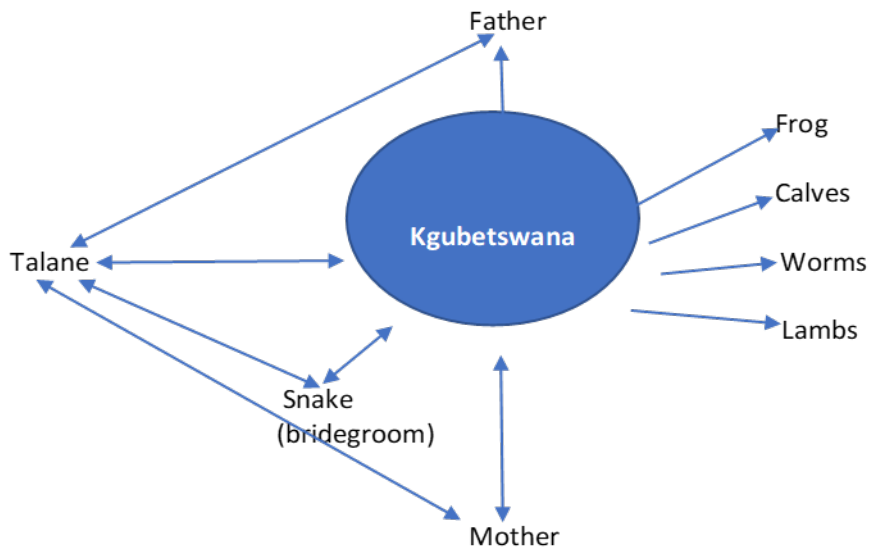
**Figure 1:** Characters' relation to each other

From Figure 1 (above), it can be seen that Kgubetswana is the character who holds the most important role in the story. As the protagonist, she always exhibits positive thinking, does good deeds and has the power to survive countless forms of suffering. She is connected to eight supporting characters (i.e. her father, mother, groom, Talane, the frog, the calves, the worms and the lambs), whereas Talane is connected to four characters (i.e. her father, mother, the groom, and her sister, Kgubetswana). The concept of binary opposition is vividly discernible. On one side is the winner (Kgubetswana) because of her goodness, while on the other side is the loser (Talane) because of her badness. From the beginning, the other sister (Talane) is jealous of Kgubetswana's beauty and intelligence. The personality of Talane does not change from the beginning till end of the story. In this story there are no supporting characters who assist Talane as an antagonist. This symbolises that the one who is patient and performs good deeds will win in the end—and that is Kgubetswana who is at the centre of the story. This is correct as observed by Marggraff (1998, 99) when he states that "most human tales arise from wrong which must be put right, or instability in social harmony which must then be restored."

## Propp's Theory in Analysing *Kgubetswana Le Talane*

According to Madu (2016, 197),

> the structural approach of analysing tales and narratives began in 1950s and 60s and had its roots in the linguistic approaches of Ferdinand Saussure. Structuralism, as discourse analysis, has traditionally been championed by scholars such as Vladimir Propp (who first applied it to tales), Roland Barthes, Claude Levi-Strauss, Algirdas Julien Greimas among others.

The fundamental idea that is equivalent in all the structuralist methodologies is that the "minimal unit of a narrative consists not in the characters that feature in the story, but in the characters' actions" (Madu 2016, 202).

In his structural analysis of Sesotho folktales using Propp's approach, Phindane (2014) observed that Propp identified 31 functions in the study of 1000 Russian folktales. Some of these functions do not all appear in one tale. The typical characters he found were the hero, the villain, the donor, the dispatcher, the helper, the false hero, etc. This is where the theory of binary opposition becomes visible because in order to understand the "hero," there must be a "villain," i.e., the protagonist and the antagonist. From the above analysis, the researcher attempted to analyse the function of the folktale *Kgubetswana le Talane*. As guided by Propp's narrative theory, this study explores his two types of functions, i.e. character functions and the 31 narrative functions in the construction of the story. The typical characters he identified are either flat or round characters. The table below (Table 1) presents the comparative analysis of *Kgubetswana le Talane* with Propp's functions.

**Table 1:** Comparison of *Kgubetswana le Talane* and Propp's functions

| Sequences / Sesotho | | Propp's Functions | |
|---|---|---|---|
| I | Kgubetswana / Talane became married to an unknown man | 1 | Absentation / Lack |
| II | Kgubetswana / Talane are given instructions to reach their destination | 2 | An interdiction |
| III | Talane does not heed the frog's advice | 3 | Violation |
| IV | Kgubetswana is assisted by the frog | 4 | Reconnaissance |
| V | Kgubetswana undertakes a trip to her bridegroom and in-laws' place | 5 | Delivery |
| VI | Kubetswana / Talana crossed the blood river; they crossed the river of worms; they crossed the river of ornaments | 6 | Trickery |
| VII | The frog advised her | 7 | Complicity |
| VIII | Talane does not heed the advice | 8 | Villainy |
| IX | Kgubetswana is surrounded by lambs and calves | 9 | Reconnaissance |
| X | Kgubetswana struggles to reach her husband's home | 10 | Agrees to fight back |
| XI | Kgubetswana leaves for her bridegroom's home | 11 | The heroine leaves her home |
| XII | Kgubetswana remembers all the things that the frog told her to follow to reach her destination | 12 | The heroine is attacked and fights back |
| XIII | Kgubetswana is assisted by the frog | 13 | The heroine receives assistance from the saviour |
| XIV | The big frog | 14 | The heroine gets help from a foreteller |
| XV | The calves and insects | 15 | The heroine is moved |
| XVI | The worms | 16 | The evildoer and the hero join to attack |
| XVII | Talane stole ornaments at the river of ornaments | 17 | Branding or marking the villain |
| XVIII | Talane laughed at the calves and lambs when she was not supposed to do that | 18 | Victory over the villain |

| XIX | Talane is not accepted by her in-laws and she is punished | 19 | The evildoer is overcome |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | 20 | The hero goes back |
| | | 21 | The hero is caught by the enemy |
| XXII | Kgubetswana rescued her husband from being a snake and turned him into a handsome man | 22 | The hero is saved |
| | | 23 | Unrecognised arrival |
| | | 24 | Claims of false heroine |
| XXV | Kgubetswana's husband was a snake and was not seen by anyone | 25 | Difficult job to do |
| XXVI | Kgubetswana uses razors to transform her husband into a human being | 26 | Job is completed |
| XXVII | Kgubetswana is happy that her husband is handsome | 27 | The heroine is known |
| | | 28 | The fake heroine is announced |
| | | 29 | The masked hero is given a new face |
| | | 30 | The evildoer is punished |
| | | 31 | Wedding |

From the comparison stipulated above, it can be noticed that the number of functions found in *Kgubetswana le Talane* is less than the 31 provided by Propp's framework. The challenge with an analysis of functions is that each function is complicated and in a sense it cannot be proven beyond reasonable doubt whether the designated function is accurate or not. It is common that from time to time other researchers may provide dissimilar analyses based on the same narrative or folktale, which may be based on different analyses of Propp's functions. From the researcher's point of view, the number of functions in *Kgubetswana le Talane* may differ from those of Propp's functions, or it might be similar to those of other scholars. The researcher chose 23 functions of *Kgubetswana le Talane* based on events and characterisation. It can be noticed that there are eight functions designated by Propp that were not fulfilled.

**Table 2:** Overlapping functions

| Kgubetswana le Talane/ Sequences | Propp's Functions |
|---|---|
| II, XIII | 1 |
| V | 2, 3 |
| VI, VII, VIII, IX | 14 |
| II, XIII | 11 |
| XIX | 30 |
| I, X | 31 |

From the above reading, it can be concluded that from *Kgubetswana le Talane* there are some functions that correlate with one function of Propp's; on the other side, there are certain functions of Propp's that correlate with one function in *Kgubetswana le Talane*. Then there are some functions that are continuously unbalanced: 20, 21, 23, 34, and 28 to 31 of Propp's theory are not linked to functions in *Kgubetswana le Talane* at all.

Earlier studies based on Propp's theory have shown that there is an indication of diversity in terms of his functions. They would often show that there are permanent and changing elements in Propp's functions of legends or folktales. In order to demonstrate this based on the comprehension of the meaning of motives in parts and in the whole story of *Kgubetswana le Talane*, an appropriate solution is to reduce the basic motives to simplified sentences. In order to illustrate this the alphabetic letters X, Y, Z are used, as shown below:

X is a bride;

Y is a bridegroom;

Y is an invisible snake;

Z is a bad person;

Z is sister to X.

These units are often referred to as narrative utterances or sentences. It is apparent that these sentences comprise elements that are existent (X, Y, Z) and predicate (becoming, is, etc.). In normal circumstances, existent elements have dual functions. Existent structures afford an opportunity to discover unstable elements in a stable place and time. From the above illustration, in the last sentence, Z is the subject while X is the supplementary subject. According to Gyem (2011, 173), this is the function of extant syntaxes: they are "functions that exist in the language," that is, in syntax we deal with sentence components: subject and the predicate (supplementary); here the relationship is between narrative utterances and functions. In *Kgubetswana le Talane*, Talane is always active, while Kgubetswana is always passive.

## Conclusion

From the analysis of the folktale *Kgubetswana le Talane*, the study may conclude with the following observation:

Other animals which include a frog, calves, lambs, a snake, and worms were used as symbols in order to strengthen the meaning of the story. There are some specific symbols that show negative meanings and others reveal positive meanings. These meanings are located in binary oppositions that further the narrative of the main characters of the story. The notion of binary opposition is utilised with the protagonist and antagonist as well as with the backing characters.

Kgubetswana, as the protagonist, is placed on the positive side; she reflects good behaviour and she is loved by everyone. At the end she is the winner when the conflict is resolved. The antagonist, Talane, is regarded as the wrongdoer and a villain. She finally lost the fight. The elements of goodness and badness are presented in a contradictory manner.

The outcome of the analysis of *Kgubetswana le Talane* using Propp's theory indicates that there are some functions of Propp's analysis model that vividly function in the folktale. There are 23 functions in *Kgubetswana le Talane* that can be identified based on Propp's analysis model. These functions are there to support the position of *Kgubetswana le Talane* in the format of a folktale universally. It can be said that in general folktales are similar and universal in nature.

## References

Ahmadi, A., M. N. Mostaali, F. Piri, and M. R. Bajelani. 2013. "Binary Opposition in the Structure of Masnavi Stories." *Journal of Language Teaching and Research* 4 (4): 724–30. https://doi.org/10.4304/jltr.4.4.724-730.

Akporobaro, F. B. O. 2004. *Introduction to African Oral Literature: A Literary-Descriptive Approach*. Lagos: Princeton Publishers.

Creany, A. D. 2013. "Who Is the Beast? The Portrayal of Animals in the Multicultural Folklore." *Journal of the European Teacher Education Network* 8: 25–34.

Dundes, A. 1997. "Binary Opposition in Myth: The Propp/Levi-Strauss Debate in Retrospect." *Western Folklore* 56 (1): 39–50. https://doi.org/10.2307/1500385.

Etyang, P. 2010. "Symbolism in Oral Literature." Unpublished paper, Kenyatta University.

Eyoh, L. 2002. "Animal Symbolism as Indicator of Cultural Unity in Nigeria." In *Essays in Language and Literature: In Honour of Ime Ikiddeh at 60*, edited by D. Eka, 46–63. Uyo: University of Uyo Press.

Gyem, K. J. 2011. "A Korean Folktale, Kongjee-Patjee: An Analysis of the Concept of Binary Opposition." *Humaniora* 23 (2): 166–74. https://doi.org/10.22146/jh.v23i2.1019.

Lacey, N. 2000. *Narrative and Genre: Key Concepts in Media Studies.* London: Palgrave MacMillan.

Lukens, R., J. J. Smith, and C. M. Coffel. 2013. *A Critical Handbook of Children's Literature.* 9th ed. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

Madu, U. 2016. "The Pedagogic Structure of Igbo Folktale: Lejja Tortoise Tales a Case Study." *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 25 (3–4): 197–217. Accessed June 6, 2019. http://www.njas.helsinki.fi/pdf-files/vol25num3-4/1_2_madu.pdf.

Makgamatha, M. P. 1989. "System of Binary Oppositions in the North Sotho *nonwane* of *Masilo le Masilwane*." *South African Journal of African Languages* 9 (3): 105–11. https://doi.org/10.1080/02572117.1989.10586787.

Makgamatha, P. M. 1993. "The Trickster Tale and Its Cultural Symbolism in North Sotho." *South African Journal for Folklore Studies* 4 (1): 60–69.

Marggraff, M. 1998. "The Moral Theme in Zulu Literature: A Progression." *Literator: Journal of Literary Criticism, Comparative Linguistics and Literary Studies* 19 (1): 93–108. https://doi.org/10.4102/lit.v19i1.515.

Mota, M. T. 2009. "The Role of Folktales in Building Personality: The Case of Lunda-Cokwe People of Angola." MA diss., University of South Africa. Accessed June 6, 2019. https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/43167201.pdf.

Okpewho, I. 1992. *African Oral Literature: Background, Character, and Continuity*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Phindane, P. 2014. "The Structural Analysis of Folktales: Propp's Approach." *South African Journal for Folklore Studies* 24 (2): 122–33. https://doi.org/10.25159/1016-8427/1612.

Propp, V. 1958. *Morphology of the Folktale*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Swanepoel, S. A. 1983. "Opening and Closing Formulae in Tswana Folktales: A Structural and Functional Analysis." *Literator: Journal of Literary Criticism, Comparative Linguistics and Literary Studies* 4 (1): 41–49. https://doi.org/10.4102/lit.v4i1.954.