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Situating Vladimir Propp in the Structural Analysis of Indian Folktale: A Study

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Abstract:

Vladimir Propp in his *Morphology of the Folktale* has broken down the Russian folklore or fairytales into thirty one morphemes. These morphemes are also known as the narrative units. According to Propp, the division of a folktale into thirty one units will help us to understand the folktale better. Propp has also called these morphemes 'chaunks'. These thirty one 'chaunks' are included under four sections. The first section that consists of first seven morphemes introduces the hero and then he starts his adventure. In the second part from eight to eleven units the villain starts his villainy and the hero becomes ready for his counter-action. The third unit that includes from twelve to nineteen morphemes deals with the hero's power to restore the magical thing. In the final section from twenty to thirty one units the hero is rewarded and the villain is punished. The aim of this paper is to make a structural analysis of an Indian folktale, *The Magic Lamp*, on the basis of the narrative units as formulated by Propp. The application of these morphemes or 'chaunks' to an Indian folktale will also explain whether all these morphemes are inevitable in the Indian folktale or not.

Keywords: Morpheme, Chaunks, Structural analysis, Folktale, Vladimir Propp.

I

Indian folk narratives are the treasure of Indian culture, tradition and heritage. Most of them are transmitted orally from generation to generation. Most of the stories did not contain written documents. Indian folk narratives in reality, acquaint us with Indian society, culture and worldview.

The thematic analysis of the Indian folk narratives focuses on the fact that they consist of folktales, legends, myths which not only concentrate on Indian culture, belief, customs, religion and society but also the stories of their origin, their supernatural belief, festivals and other ceremonies. In short, they acquaint us with Indian life. A study of the structural pattern of these folktales can be made through detailed analysis of the structure and citing various examples from the anthology.

Vladimir Propp was a folklorist, who was born on 17th April, 1898. He belonged to a German family in St. Petersburg. He studied both in Russia and German Philology. Earlier he taught both

Russian and Germany in a secondary school. Then he was appointed as a college teacher of German. Propp analysed the plot of a Russian folktale into thirty one narrative units in his *Morphology of the Folktale*. Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* was first published in Russian in 1928. The book created a new era in the analysis of folklore when it was translated in English in the year of 1958. The discussion of the narrative structure of the Indian folktales can be made in consonance with Vladimir Propp's structural analysis of the Russian folktales in his book, *Morphology of the Folktale*. Propp has analysed the folktales in his country and identified a series of similar themes and content in them. We can find convergences in the folktales all over the world. Hence we can apply Propp's theory in the analysis of the structural pattern of Indian folktale too.

He broke down these folktales in 31 morphemes¹ ('chaunks'²) and analysed them. These 31 morphemes help us in understanding the structure of any folktale properly. The application of them to folktales leads us in analyzing the plot construction, character and motif of the story in a better way. However, all these 31 elements may not be found in all the folktales all over the world. Some stories omit some elements; in some stories we find the repetition of some elements. But it cannot happen that the story is not having any one of the 31 elements. It will be helpful to make a comparative study of whether the elements identified by Propp can be made applicable to Indian folktales. Here is an outline of an Indian folktale, *The Magic Lamp*. Due to the influence of mainstream or non-tribal culture, the story under discussion is also available in Santal or other tribal society. The story is taken from the collection of Santal folktales but it is mostly popular in the domain of Bengali as well as Indian folktale. This particular story is selected due to its possession of maximum number of narrative units formulated by Propp. The story is narrated as below:

II

The Magic Lamp

A poor widow lived with her son in a capital. One day a merchant came and enquired of her husband. He started mourning when he heard that her husband was no more. He stayed in the widow's house for few days. One day he asked the woman to prepare food for them as he and her son would start looking for garden flowers. After walking a long distance the boy felt fatigued. But as the merchant was scolding and beating, the boy walked along the road rapidly and reached a hill. Both of them reached the top of the hill and gathered a pile of wood. The merchant ordered him to kindle fire and threatened him to beat him again if his order was not carried out. After kindling the fire they found an iron trap-door beneath the ash. The boy at length succeeded. They found a lamp burning, and beside it, a large number golden flowers. The merchant forced the boy to enter and collect the golden flowers as many as he could. When the boy refused, the merchant shut the door and went away.

In the dark chamber and denied food, the boy started weeping. Unconsciously, when he was rubbing his hand his finger ring came into contact with the lamp. Immediately a fairy appeared

and asked what he wanted. He asked her to open the door and help him to go. The boy returned with the lamp and asked his mother for food. As there was nothing to eat, he was cleaning the lamp to sell it. Once again the fairy appeared in front of him when his finger came in touch with the lamp. The boy asked her for cooked and uncooked rice which she immediately provided. The fairy also gave the boy a horse.

When the boy turned into a young man he fell in love with the princess seeing her bathing in the river. He requested his mother to ask the hand of king's daughter for marriage. When his mother approached, the king asked a large amount of money as bride price for this match. The large amount which was even larger than King's property, was supplied to the boy by the fairy. The King was astonished at the sight of the immense money that a poor boy possessed. The boy's mother then asked the king to fulfill his promise. But the king felt reluctant as he was not keen on giving away his daughter to an inferior. To avoid the marriage he now demanded a castle suitable for his daughter. This time also the 'never failing friend' of the boy helped him with a large castle adorned and furnished beautifully for the princess. Next morning the whole city woke up with great amazement and found the palace in place of a hut. Thereafter, the marriage was celebrated with great mirth and entertainment.

One day the king and his son-in-law went to the forest for hunting. In the meantime the dishonest merchant mentioned earlier, appeared at the castle with a new lamp and wanted to exchange it with the old one. The princess found it a great opportunity to sell the old one without knowing what it was. The dishonest merchant rubbed his ring on the magic lamp. As before the fairy appeared and she gratified his desire by relocating the castle of the princess to his own country.

After their return from the forest when there was no trace of the palace, bereaved and angry king ordered that if his son-in-law was not able to find out his daughter he would kill him. Being clueless, when the boy was playing on the hill, he rubbed his finger on the rock. A fairy appeared there and asked about the boy's need. The boy stated if he and the fairy could move to the gate of the merchant's castle.

III

Propp's *Morphology of the Folktales* was unknown to the scholars before it was translated into English. Propp borrowed the term 'morpheme' from Botany. In Botany morpheme means the small component of plants. Morphological Botany leads to analyze the structure of plants as well as the relation of each plant and even the whole family of similar plants. Propp used the term 'morpheme' in the sense of narrative function. He defined it as "an act of dramatis personae, which is defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of action of the tale as a whole". Function is related with the action of seven dramatic personae or their roles as observed by Propp. The functions performed by seven dramatic personae — *the villain, the donor, the helper, the princess, the dispatcher, the hero* and *the false hero* — help to comprehend the story. Now we will analyse the aforementioned Indian folktale on the basis of the 31 morphemes

(‘chaunks’) that Propp has identified for the structural analysis of folktales. The analysis of folklore is based on Propp’s structural model which contains thirty one morphemes grouped under four sections. The morphemes identified by Propp really help us to understand the story better.

First phase: Introduction

This part includes 1-7 steps where we find the introduction of the main characters in the story and at the same time the hero gets ready for his adventure.

1. *Absentation*: Here we find that hero is introduced and he is leaving home i.e. the safe and secure environment. The departure of the hero injects some kind of tension in the story. Generally an ordinary person is introduced here as the hero.

In the said folktale the boy has to leave his home when his uncle asks his mother that they will start in search of golden flowers. It indicates a kind of tension too.

2. *Interdiction*: Hero gets a warning. He is given the warning that he shouldn’t go somewhere or do something.

The boy gets a warning indirectly. Still when his uncle starts scolding or beating it was a kind of warning for him.

3. *Violation of Interdiction*: The warning is violated by the hero. In spite of the warning the hero takes a move. It appears to be alarming. The villain also starts his villainy here. Other members of the family may be attacked by the villain when the hero is away from home.

The boy in spite of the ill treatment from the merchant continues to travel with him. The situation becomes worse for him after that.

4. *Reconnaissance*: The villain tries to find out something. He may search a valuable thing like jewel, or the child of the family. He may ask for some secret information and any member of the family may divulge everything to the villain due to his innocence or ignorance. The villain may also try to meet the hero. He is found to take possession of something.

In this story reconnaissance is not directly shown. We only find that the villain i.e. the merchant by his power is actively forcing the boy to enter the cave and search for the gold flowers.

5. *Delivery*: The villain here collects information about the hero or some valuable and necessary thing like map or the place where some hidden treasure can be discovered.

This element of getting information is not clear here. Here the dishonest merchant does not get any information. He just gets what he wanted i.e. the gold flowers.

6. *Trickery*: The villain tries to deceive the hero to capture his belongings. He may appear in a disguise. He uses the information collected from the family member of the hero or the victim and by using them he gains the confidence of the hero. Here also the villain makes the hero realize he is a friend of him.

The trick that the villain plays is not found here. It appears at the middle of the story when the merchant appears and tries to befool the princess, his wife and owner of great wealth and the palace.

7. *Complicity*: Here the victim unknowingly helps the villain. The trick or the plan that the villain makes now becomes successful as the hero hands over a valuable thing like a map or some magical weapons. Here the hero or the victim even works against the good people as he is convinced by the villain that those people are bad.

This part also happens when the boy's wife is befooled by the merchant and sells the old magical lamp in lieu of a new lamp in place of a new lamp which the merchant brings with him.

Second phase: The main action of the story:

The main action of the story starts here and this second part is extended in the quest of the hero.

8. *Villainy or Lack*: The villain may cause some injury to the family members of the hero, commit murder, destroys crops, steal some magical thing, imprison someone, expel somebody, and give nightly torments. There are two ways either or both of which may happen in the story, through which the villain performs this function. In the first way the villain causes harm or takes some magical thing. In the second option we find the lack of something in the family or in the community especially a desirable magical object is lost that could be very helpful in a way.

The merchant by his villainy takes possession of the magical lamp which saves his life and gives him all the fortune in life. Here the function is made in through the second option where a valuable magical object is lost.

9. *Mediation*: The hero feels the deception of the villain. He realizes this by seeing his family in a devastating condition or by being in a state of anguish or pain. Here the hero may be freed from imprisonment or he may listen to the call for help.

This feeling of deception or loss happens in the story twice. First, when the boy is left alone devoid of any food in the cave and secondly, when the boy returning home from

hunting with the king discovers that his magic lamp is taken away by that dishonest merchant and he has taken the possession of his castle as well as his wife.

10. *Beginning counter-action*: The hero starts his counter action. He makes the resolution of retrieving that magical object. The hero may rescue the persons who were made captive by the villain. At that point the story takes a move as the hero resolves which gives birth to the future action of the story. This is a defining moment for the hero because the ordinary person becomes a hero through his heroic decision.

In the story the counter action is initiated by the hero when he resolves to find out his wife (the princess) within thirteen days.

11. *Departure*: Hero leaves home for his mission.

The boy leaves home and starts searching for his wife everywhere desperately.

3rd Sphere: The major activities of the hero:

In the third sphere the boy tries to search for a method by which he can restore the magical thing or the donor.

12. *First function of the donor*

Hero gets the way in which he can gain the magical helper. Hero has to face many challenges and prove his heroic qualities.

In this story we find the tenacity of the hero when he was searching for his wife everywhere.

13. *Hero's reaction*

Hero responds to the challenges he has to face. He may be a failure or become successful. He may free the captive people.

Here the hero, out of despondency, goes to the top of the hill and due to tiredness he sleeps there.

14. *Receipt of a magical agent*: Here the hero meets the magical element what he was searching for or which may help him to get what he was searching.

While sleeping the ring of the boy unconsciously comes in contact with the rock where he lay and a fairy appears before him to solve his problem.

15. *Guidance*: The magical element helps him or tells him the whereabouts of the object that he was looking for or helps him to reach his destination.

The boy requests the fairy to help him to reach his wife in the castle .And the fairy immediately transports him to the castle and he meets his wife.

16. *Struggle*: Hero and villain come face-to-face with each other and start fighting.

Here the villain and the hero do not fight directly. The hero conspires with his wife to defeat the villain i.e. the merchant.

17. *Branding*: Hero gets wounded. A deep mark of wound is found on his body.

The boy does not get any wound or mark on his body. But he consults with his wife to offer the merchant poisoned rice when he will ask for food.

18. *Victory*: Villain is defeated here. He may be killed in war, defeated in a duel, may be murdered while sleeping.

19. *Liquidation*: The hero wins and the misfortune that was hovering, is now dispelled. Here a person who was slain before may be revived or the captive may be freed.

After killing his enemy the boy restores his magic lamp, his castle and his wife at the same time.

Fourth phase: The comeback of the hero:

It is the final section of the story. Here the hero returns home. The hero is rewarded here and the villain gets punishment. This section of the story may not happen always. The elements from no. 21-30 are not found in the above Santal folk tale.

20. *Return*: The hero starts his journey and returns home. After defeating the merchant the boy returns home with the princess.

21. *Pursuit*: The hero is chased. The pursuers follow him to kill.

22. *Rescue*: The pursuit ends here. The hero is saved. It may happen that the pursuer is delayed by some obstacles, the hero may hide himself or may be hidden or he may also take a disguise.

23. *Unrecognized arrival*: The hero reaches his homeland or he may also reach some other land. He appears unrecognizable.

24. *Unfounded claims*: As the hero is unrecognized another false hero claims to be the hero.

25. *Difficult task*: To remove the confusion a task has to be assigned both for the hero and the false hero. The task generally happens to be an ordeal or a riddle that tests the strength or endurance of both the persons.

26. *Solution*: Here comes the result of the task.

27. *Recognition*: The hero is recognized here by some mark on his body or by the strength he has shown in the test.

28. *Exposure*: Here the false hero gets exposed.

29. *Transfiguration*: The hero appears in new garment. He is given a charming appearance.

30. *Punishment*: Villain gets the punishment.

31. *Wedding*: The hero is rewarded. He marries the princess and ascends the throne.

In the said story the boy after returning home is rewarded by the king. The king is delighted after getting back his daughter and rewards half of his kingdom to his son-in-law.

IV

We may draw the conclusion from the above discussion that the morphemes into which a folklore is broken down to analyze the story, are noteworthy. All the functions are inevitable in the storyline of a folktale or a fairytale. But the subject important to mention is that all of the functions may not be present in a folktale. For instance in *The Magic Lamp* the functions of the last section like 'return', 'pursuit', 'rescue', 'unrecognized arrival', 'unfounded claims', 'difficult task', 'solution', 'recognition', 'wedding', 'transfiguration', 'punishment', 'exposure' are not applicable. But it seems that the folktales or fairytales from all over the world may not include all the morphemes but there cannot be any elements in the stories excluding them.

Notes:

1. Morpheme: In Linguistics the minimal meaningful unit of structure in a language is called morpheme. The study of morpheme is known as morphology.
2. Chaunks: Chaunks are the analyzable units that Propp has mentioned in his *Morphology of the Folktale*. They are also called the narrative units into which a folktale or fairy tale may be divided.

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