

**Mythic Journey for Self-Actualization in *Kesar*:
A Structuralist Study of the Balti Epic**

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Abstract

Quest, journey and character evolution have been recurring leitmotifs of folklore. The present study aims to focus on the structural analysis of the Balti folktale *Kesar*, an ancient story narrated orally not only in Gilgit-Baltistan but also in Tibet, Magnolia, China and India. This study analyzes *Kesar* by examining underlying structures to show how these patterns, motifs and symbols render *Kesar* an epic. Moreover, the study of the symbols of *Kesar* unfolds how the text constructs meaning in a broader system from which it has emerged. Furthermore, the type, nature and mode of the story are explored and studied by following the frameworks of *Archetypal Criticism* by Northrop Frye and *Morphology of Folktales* by Vladimir Propp through the examination of characterization, plot, functions and dramatis personae. The *Theory of Mythoi* helps identify the genre, the *Theory of Mode* explores the era in which it emerged and *Proppian Model* investigates the complete structure of the text. This study encourages other researchers to go for similar studies and it would greatly help to discover a rich yet untouched Balti literature.

Key Words: Balti Folk tale, *Kesar*, Northrop Frye, Structuralism, Vladimir Propp

Introduction

Literature has blurry boundaries, therefore, there is no rigid and fixed definition for literature. Now even oral literature, music, art, opera, film, and animated movies are included in the radius of literature. Pettersson explains that in ancient civilizations the scope of literature was very vast. He argues that literature means all the writings which transcend “very limited practical purposes” (2015, p. 2). In ancient civilizations, literature was available only in oral form which is also called folklore or folk literature.

Folk literature includes myths, legends, epics, folk tales, stories, songs, proverbs, riddles, and fables. Oral literature not only does entertain but also embodies the culture, history, belief system and social structure of the specific time and space in which it was composed. Describing the importance of folklore in his book *Theories and History of Folklore*, Propp avers that “none of the humanities, be it ethnography, history, linguistics, or the history of literature, can do without folklore” (1997, p.3)

Historical Background:

Most of the Balti literature, especially pre-historic literature, is available in oral form. Literature carries information about specific cultures, belief systems, myths, legends, political systems, wars, rituals, and practices. In Baltistan, there is a tradition of narrating folk stories during the winter season. Severe winters and snow bring life to a standstill. People gather in one of the spacious houses of a neighbour and narrate the folktales in order to assuage the anxiety of prolonged winter nights. Two types of stories are narrated; the one which was composed in the local context, for example, Kesar, Rgyalu-Stralbu, Api-Xho-Fara, etc. and the second was borrowed from different cultures which are, Alif Laila, Sheereen Farhad, Rustam and Sohrab, etc. Among all these stories, Kesar is one of the longest, interesting and widely narrated stories in Baltistan, Tibet and Ladakh. Hasrat (2007, p. 23) believes that the story of Kesar was composed before Christ when Bon religion was practiced in this region. The hero of the story is Kesar, and it is believed that Kesar is one of the gods of Bon religion. In the story it is narrated that Kesar is the youngest son of the heavenly God 'Hla-Yukhpon' and he descended on the earth to do away with the anarchy from the region. Hasrat (2005) states in the Encyclopedia of Northern Area that Kesar not only shows the ancient civilization of Baltistan and Tibet but also provides glimpses of cultures in the neighbouring countries, like India, China, Mongolia and the civilization of Turks (Hor

(p. 261). Kesar is the story of a wise man; a marvellous hero, wisely and sincerely fighting for the cause of his country. He encounters various forces of evil during his journey and quest. According to Kesar, there are thirteen provinces or small states of Tibet including Ling in which most of the actions take place. This throws light on various aspects of social life including beliefs, rituals, ways of life and the relationships and wars with the neighbouring countries. Sikandar (1997) argues that:

Kesar Saga may well be treated as the earliest chronicles of Tibet (present Baltistan, Ladakh and Tibet), a vast source of information about pre-historic Tibet with her peculiar ways and system, peculiar beliefs and social, moral and human values to be handed down to and accepted by all succeeding generation as authentic, wide policies and wise rules of conduct... truly things classic, providing stable framework for cultural heritage of the country (Sikandar, Ladakh in the mirror of her Folklore, 1997).

Context of the problem for this paper:

Balti literature has been an unexplored realm in literary research. Balti version of *Kesar* too has been less explored text. No literature exists on structural analysis of the Balti folktale. Therefore, the exploration of indigenous folktale and structural analysis help us trace the context of this literary tradition. Drawing upon the *Theory of Mode* and *Theory of Mythoi* by Northrop Frye and *Morphology of Folktales* by Vladimir Propp the structural analysis of *Kesar* is carried out. Frye gained fame with

the publication of his *Anatomy of Criticism* in 1957. In this book, he proposed that the totality of literary works constitutes a “self-contained literary universe” (p. 118). Archetypal literary criticism is defined as, “the investigation and analysis of archetypal and mythical narrative patterns, character types, themes and motifs in literature and their recurrence in literature” (Cuddon, 2013, p. 51). Vladimir Propp was one of the early Russian Structuralists, who analyzed different folktales and identified some common themes and structures within them. He identified thirty-one *functions* in folktales which are performed by seven *dramatis personas*. Cuddon explains that the “[f]unction is the basic unit of the narrative ‘language’ and denotes or refers to the actions which constitute the narrative” (458). And *dramatis persona* is the actants who perform the functions in narratives.

Research Questions:

This study focuses on the following questions:

1. How have the protagonist and plot been interwoven together in the text (*Kesar*) that render it an archetypal genre?
2. How does the relationship between the text’s grammar and the culture from which the text emerged epitomize the ancient Balti epoch?

Literature Review:

Vladimir Propp has identified seven actants and thirty-one functions, which he believes is the broader structure of all folktales. He analyzed hundred Russian

folktales to develop his framework. Takenori Wama and Ryohei Nakatsu have applied Propp’s model of structuralism to twenty Japanese folktales. They identified Proppian structure behind these folktales but sometimes Japanese folktales do not fit in this model. They say, “We anticipated many hurdles because we tried to analyze Japanese folktales rather than the Russian ones he analyzed. However, we could successfully analyze twenty representative Japanese folktales by utilizing the 31 functions defined by Propp” (2008, p. 426). It is also stated that there is not a single ‘storyline’, as in the case of Russian tales. They claim, “Based on our findings, we are now trying to develop a model of generating Japanese folktales”. Opheim (2010) identifies the same underlying structure in these fantasy narratives: *Coraline*, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* and *The Amber Spyglass*. He argues that Proppian typology can be used to analyze all sorts of narratives and he used Propp’s methodology for the analysis of fantasy genre. He says that some functions are common in all types of tales. For example, the function of abandonment which Opheim found in all three stories.

Tim Ellison (2015) asserts that Frye was the “master of mythic criticism” of the last century. Ellison points out that Frye (1957) defines literature as “autonomous verbal structures” (p. 74). Ellison identifies that Frye has divided the whole literature into five categories keeping in mind the status of the hero. The first one is Mythic in which the character is superior in kind to both humans

and their environment. After mythic other three modes of decreasing divinity and increasing humanity, “from the Romantic to the High Mimetic to the Low Mimetic” (p.2). Ellison describes that the last mode is the mode of irony and satire; in which the protagonist is inferior to reader. He further says, “we have the protagonists of the Ironic mode: the mad Don Quixotes and the hapless Falstaffs and the whole cast of It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia” (p. 2).

Elders of Baltistan believe that folklore is the main source which transfers wisdom, tradition, history and myths from generation to generation. In winters, the people of Baltistan gather in a house to listen to stories. Hasrat (2007) identifies that there are two types of stories narrated in Baltistan; composed in traditional and cultural context and borrowed from other cultures. He believes Kesar has been adapted in their cultural context and it is one of the most interesting and lengthy stories which is listened to with keen interest. Hasrat says that the main theme of the story is to uproot anarchy from the state of Ling, for this purpose Kesar is sent by his father Hla-Ukpon. Hasrat says, “This story is also considered true but many of the characters in the story are superior in kind to both humans and their environment, that’s why now it is seen as fictional” (2007, p. 253). Hasrat and Yousuf believe that folklore is the mirror of ancient civilization, it describes ancient civilizations of Tibet, Ladakh and Baltistan. Kesar epic is one of the longest stories which is narrated in this region and it consists of

twelve cantos (Hasrat, 2005 p, 261, Yousuf, 2003, p. 347).

Theoretical Framework:

Structuralists point out that the structuring mechanism of the human mind is the means by which “we make sense out of chaos” (Tyson, 2006, p. 219) and literature is the most influential means to describe the world. This study intends to study the narrative dimension of literary text because Structuralists primarily deal with narrative. Narrative includes a long history and a wide range of text from ancient myths to folktales and fairy tales, ancient oral custom to the multifaceted and complex written text found in modern and postmodern novels. In this study, two different theories are blended for the analysis of Balti folktales. Commonalities and differences are considered to make a conceptual framework. Both theories fall in Structuralist criticism; in these theories broader structure of literary texts is proposed. Characterization in the plot, the genre of the text and functions of the characters are discussed by Propp and Frye in their respective theories.

Characterization:

In structuralism, theorists scrutinize characters to propose to underline structure in literature. Frye derived the idea of characterization from Aristotle and further proposed the *Theory of Mode*. The *Theory of Mode* helps us trace the time period in which it was composed. Frye associates every genre with a specific time. He derives the definition of mode from Aristotle’s *Poetics* and observes that Aristotle categorizes fiction

according to the power of the hero of the story. He also observes some characters are good, some are bad and some are the same as normal human beings. Aristotle's claim was not given much attention by modern critics.

For instance, Frye categorizes literary genres on the bases of the power of the hero or protagonist. Frye only discusses the protagonist of the story, Propp mentions seven characters in his theory 'Morphology of Folktale'. Propp names these 'Dramatis Personae' as Villain, Donor, Helper, Princes, Dispatcher, Hero and False Hero. Propp believes that these identified dramatis personae are assigned specific functions.

A plot of a piece of fiction consists of a series of the actions of characters, if the character is the hero of the story then "something he does or fails to do is what he can do, or could have done, on the level of the postulates made about him by the author and the consequent expectations of the audience" (Frye, 1957, p. 33). It means the categorization of fiction is depended on the power of the hero, which may be inferior to, superior to, or like us. In the *Theory of Mode*, Frye presents five types of fictional modes: myth, romance, high mimesis, low mimesis and, irony and satire. He says, "We shall here deal chiefly with the five epochs. In each mode, a distinction will be useful between naïve [primitive] and sophisticated literature" (1957, p. 33). His classification of genres is based on the status of the protagonist or hero as compared to both men and their environment. He proposes that the

hero would be superior, inferior and equal to man and their environment both in kind and degree. Frye further says, "Oriental fiction does not, so far as I know, get very far away from mythical and romantic formulas" (1957, p. 35). Frye finds these phenomena in the eastern cultures as well. Frye analyzed only the power of the protagonist or the hero of the text and associated the hero with a specific genre, which means he has considered many genres in his theory. But Propp has discussed the characters of a single genre which is folktale or fairytale. Propp analyzes a hundred folktales and fairytales and sees commonalities in these tales. From the analysis of these folktales, Propp derives seven dramatis personae, i.e. seven leading characters through whom thirty-one functions are carried. Fisseni (2014) states that the "[f]unctions occur in strict sequential order, i.e. they have to occur in the folktale in the order they are given in the list" (p. 490). These functions are associated with specific characters in the tale, which he calls dramatis persona. Propp identifies seven actants who play their role in a folk tale, they are: villain (V), Donor (Do), helper (MH), the process (P), the dispatcher (Di), the hero (H), false hero (FH).

Genre and Functions:

Frye deals with four genres in his theory, which he finds in the western and oriental literary tradition. Structure of genre is discussed in the *Theory of Myth or Mythoi*, which seeks structural principles underlying literary tradition. He introduces a term *Mythos* and *Mythoi*, which refers to the

four narrative forms in literature. Frye says, "We thus have four narrative pregeneric elements of literature which I shall call mythoi or generic plots" (p. 162). Contrarily, Propp deals only with two genres which are folktales and fairytales, he believes that the structure of all folktales is the same as the structure of folktales. He coined the term *Marche* for folktale and fairytale because of their structural similarities. Though Frye mentioned four genres in his book *Anatomy of Criticism* yet he argues that the genre of myth is not widely seen in literary canon that's why he excluded mythic literature in the discussion of genre. He proposes four mythoi; mythos of summer, autumn, winter and spring which symbolize four literary genres. In the explanation of Mythoi, Frye claims that these Mythoi reveal the underlying structure of a genre; specifically, romance, tragedy, irony or satire and comedy. He argues that humans project narrative imagination in two ways: depiction of an ideal world and the real world. The ideal world is better than the real world, it is the world of fulfilment, pleasure and a utopian world and the real world is a world of misery, struggle and a dystopian world. Frye calls the ideal world as Mythos of summer, and it is associated with the genre of romance. In contrast, Mythos of winter is associated with the genre of irony and satire. The remaining two mythoi involve the movement from one of these worlds to another. Mythos of autumn is associated with the genre of Tragedy. It involves movements from the summer to winter which means

movements from the ideal to the real world or innocence to experience. The last one is the Mythos of spring, it is associated with the genre of comedy. It involves the movement from winter to summer which means movement from real to ideal or miseries to a utopian world.

Propp was interested in the underlying structure of folktale and fairytale, not in the study of other genres as Frye was. Propp identifies seven *dramatis personas* and he believes that these characters or actants are assigned to perform specific actions, which he terms as 'function'. For Propp (1968), "Function is understood as an act of a character, defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of the action" (p. 21). He points out that the functions are repeating in the study of every folktale which he has selected. The functions are constant in its place but it is possible that the functions repeat again and again. Propp (1968) observes, "We are aware of the fact that the repetition of functions by various characters was long ago observed in myths and beliefs by historians of religion, but it was not observed by historians of the tale" (p. 20). Vladimir Propp, in his book *Morphology of the Folk Tale*, described in rather abstract terms as a set of recurring plot devices which he named as functions that he identified in a certain genre of Russian folk tales. Brown says, Not all of them are there and they don't all happen in the same order in the stories he analyzed, but they are a large part of how we distinguish a text as a fairy tale; although sometimes you have to smash the tropes to

make them fit right. This was probably one of the first critical trope-spotting” (2010, p. 117).

Propp's Morphological study of folktales is important for two correlated Structuralist ideas: first, all fictional works have basically the same underline and broader structure, secondly, a story can be created by instantiating a sequence of abstract plot elements.

Analysis and Discussion:

Analysis of this study is divided into two parts: one is the characterization of the story and the second is the functions of the characters and the genre of *Kesar*. The theoretical frameworks of Northrop Frye and Vladimir Propp are used to analyze the story through the lens of Structuralist criticism.

Characterization:

The name Kesar or Gesar is found in ancient Roman, Greek, Tibetan, Indian, Chinese, Tibetan and Asian literature including Balti literature. In different cultures and literature, King Kesar is presented differently but the following features are common in all these traditions: Kesar possessed heavenly power, wisdom and descended to remove anarchy from the region. When he descended, Tibet (Baltistan, Ladakh and Tibet) was on the verge of chaos because of lawlessness and anarchy. At the beginning of the story, it is narrated that the people of Tibet were keenly waiting for a leader who will restore the law, equality and peace in the region. They demanded their God 'Hla-Yukpon' to send one of his sons on earth. God has seven sons and all his sons

refused to go on earth and the youngest son Kesar agreed to go on earth on two conditions, “whatever I wish, it must be prevailed and I must be sent as eternal on earth” (Kesar, p, 12). He was sent on earth in the form of milk and a man drank the milk. His name was Phasangay and he was a leader of his tribe. This made his wife pregnant and Kesar was delivered. Before birth, Kesar possessed supernatural characteristics. Frye theorized that the characteristics and the power of the protagonist decide the genre and structure of the story. *Kesar* is widely known as epic in the world, but many times it is named as a saga, and in this study, we have taken it as a folktale. *Kesar* is called epic or saga because of the composition and division of the chapter and it is taken as a folktale because all the characteristics which Propp theorized about the narrative technique can be seen in this story. If *Kesar* is analyzed while considering the power of the protagonist, then sometimes it can be considered as romance but mostly, the text supports it as myth. When Kesar was in the womb of his mother, he listened to all the conversations of his father and mother. Even from the womb, he talked with his mother. Kesar's birth is still famous and used as a proverb in Baltistan when someone delays any work because Kesar delayed his birth. When Kesar was about to be delivered, he said to his mother that he would be delivered that day on the top of the mountain. When she went there he refused to be delivered and he repeated this action again and again. Many months later, he hypnotized his mother and

delivered and sat on the top of a cupboard. He refused to come down because he had already listened to his parent's discussion and he was afraid that his mother would kill him. Frye's classification of genres is based on the status and power of the protagonist or hero as compared to both men and their environment. He proposes that the hero would be superior, inferior and equal to man and their environment both in kind and degree. The deeds and actions of Kesar are superior in kind to both men and their environment. Frye says that their type of characters are divine beings and the fictional mode is myth. All the mythic characteristics proposed by Northrop Frye can be seen in the character of Kesar. Though Kesar possesses divine characteristics yet we have much evidence that he also possesses characteristics of ordinary beings. In the opening of the story, it is mentioned that he is the son of god but when the story progresses he behaves like an ordinary being. His tragic flaws, inability, incurableness and his dealing with the worldly matters make him as an ordinary being.

Further, both are divided into further two categories: the group of the characters that wants peace, rule of law, prosperity and harmony in the regions. The second type of characters are the characters who celebrate lawlessness and anarchy. They always create hurdles and mess among the people of Tibet. Kesar is the leader of this group as his main purpose of descending on the earth is to remove anarchy from the Tibetan region. Different types of characters can be seen in

the story of *Kesar* – magical characters, protagonist, antagonist, heroine and other characters. Proppian study proposes seven dramatic personae in a folktale. The characters or actants in *Kesar* are categorized in two classifications: supernatural and humanly characters. Kesar was the hero of the story having supernatural characteristics in him and had love, affection, passion and chauvinistic feelings for his nation and people of his nation. Many other characters either help Kesar or they contribute to the rehabilitation and recovery of nation from lawlessness. Kesar's brother 'Bu-Bustan' performs as the helper and assistant to his brother and sacrifice his life to protect the honour of his brother.

In this study, Proppian dramatic personae are also observed but the characterization of the characters is not as simple as Propp has observed. Propp says that the hero is the character who is humble, noble, brave and softhearted. Of course, Kesar is brave and noble but sometime Kesar the hero of the story behaves like the villain of the story. Propp has not left any vacancy for the hero to behave like an antagonist and possesses cruelty. The wife of Kesar took to 'Hor' as prisoner by the king of 'Hor'. She stayed there for many years and got married to the king and she had birthed a son with the king of Hor. After many years Kesar restores his wife 'Hlano-Brukmo' from the custody of king of 'Hor'. He cut the head of the son from his sword and while riding on running horse he hit the head with stick like a ball.

Genre:

Frye introduces a term Mythos/Mythoi, which refers to the four narrative forms in literature. Frye says, "We thus have four narrative pregeneric elements of literature which I shall call mythoi or generic plots" (p.162). This theory seeks structural principles underlying Western and Oriental literary traditions. Frye says that human projects narrative imagination in two ways: depiction of an ideal world and the real world. The ideal world is a utopian world and the real world is a dystopian world. When Kesar was called on earth, the people of Tibet were in a state of Fryerian real world. Miseries, struggle and lawlessness were overwhelming and Kesar's descendent made the state able to restore the writ. When the hero Kesar was descended, a utopian condition is depicted in the story and Frye believes that it is an ideal world which is better than the real world, ideal world is the world of fulfilment, pleasure and a utopian world. In the story, this utopian region is filled with prosperity, peace and pleasure. Frye calls it the *mythos of summer*, and he associates it with the genre of romance. This is the world of adventure, of successful quests in which brave, virtuous heroes and beautiful maidens overcome villainous threats to the achievement of their goals. The quest of Kesar is to restore law and order, thus, he achieves the three beautiful maidens and defeats the neighbouring countries in war. Furthermore, he was threatened and warned by many characters and supernatural creatures but he achieves his goal while

overcoming villainous threats. Sometimes he got escape through his wit and sometimes he triumphed with his power. A gypsy woman in the story informed Kesar about the two beautiful women/maidens and briefs him about the beauty of these maidens. She told Kesar to go to see his uncles Momo Spanlaib and Momo Monparaq for more information. During his quest, he confronted the guards of Palmay-Astaq, they were guarding her in the guise of birds and Kesar was partially defeated and he couldn't get her in his first attempt. But he was motivated and convinced to achieve her at any cost. At last, he achieved his goal and got Palmy-Astaq. He didn't have any tragic flow; in every event he got success and this is the characteristic of the romance. Frye called this type of story an ideal world, this is the world of adventure and the successful quest of the hero. Frye was interested to reveal the underlying structure of the genre with his analysis of the hero only. Propp was interested to dig out the underlying structure of the folktale only with the analysis of seven dramatic personae and thirty-one functions. We have a Proppian typical hero in the story, in which Kesar is performing the Proppian functions of the hero, which are; the beginning of counteraction, departure of the hero from home, the hero's reaction to villain, marriage with the princess, return of the hero from quest and the arrival of the hero. Many of the functions are performed many times by the characters. For example, Kesar married thrice in the story, which is the function assigned to the hero. The story of *Kesar*

deviates from Proppian functions specifically on the functions of the donor and the helper. In this narrative, the functions of both donor and helper are performed by one character. Kesar's maternal uncles Mono Spanlaib and Momo Monparaq performed the functions of both donor and helper. When Kesar starts his journey in the quest of Palmay-Astaq, he was given three magical things by his uncle, these things are; three barley seeds, a few hairs and flint stones. His uncle advises him about the use of these things.

Conclusion:

The Structuralist analysis of Balti folktale has been carried out from the angles: *Theory of Mode* and *Theory of Mythoi* by Northrop Frye and *Morphology of Folktales* by Vladimir Propp. It is evident in this study that every folktale has its own structure which is dependent on the culture which

produces it. Though we found many similarities in the characterization and the structure of genres yet it is seen that often than not it deviates from the frameworks, which are used in the current study. With the analysis of the characterization, we conclude that this story does not fall in any Fryerian genre. It is a mixture of myth and romance, so we call this new genre *Romyth*. Proppian characters are there but the characterization of the characters is not as simple as Propp has observed. Propp says that the hero is a character who is humble, noble, brave and softhearted. Of course, Kesar is brave and noble but sometime as the hero of the story he behaves like a villain. This evidences that it is a mythic story and offers a mixture of myth and romance and I propose this genre as 'Romyth'.

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